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## **SHAABAN LAUNCHES DRIVE TO REACH F1 PINNACLE**

### **Sulayem boosts Lebanese driver as he seeks backing to power breakthrough into racing elite**

Dubai, UAE, 11<sup>th</sup> October, 2006: Basil Shaaban today officially launched his bid to become the Arab world's first Formula One racing driver.

Shaaban is aiming to complete his climb onto the Grand Prix circuit through a two to three year assault on the traditional Formula One ladder championships, the British Formula Three International and GP2 Series.

He announced his intentions at a press briefing in Dubai today with the support of Mohammed Ben Sulayem, President of the Automobile and Touring Club for the UAE. Sulayem, the 14-times FIA Middle East rally champion, was one of his earliest inspirations in motor sport.

Over the next few weeks Shaaban, currently one of the racing drivers with A1 Team Lebanon in the A1GP World Cup of Motorsport, will be holding talks with potential sponsors in Dubai and Beirut aimed at securing the backing he needs to embark on a full Formula Three programme next year.

He is already in discussions with two F3 championship-winning teams eager to secure his services, and has spent months putting together a sophisticated sponsorship package – SHAABAN2F1 - designed to give backers broad ranging benefits on a Pan Arab and global basis.

Shaaban, born in Beirut and raised in Abu Dhabi, fine-tuned his approach to corporate marketers after holding discussions with Sulayem. In addition to being the most successful driver in FIA rallying history, Sulayem enjoyed long-term relationships with major sponsors throughout his record-breaking career.

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Said Shaaban: “I’m very excited about the prospects ahead, and am extremely grateful to Mohammed for his support, and for the advice he has given me based on his considerable motorsport experience stretching over three decades. Like many others I was inspired by his success as a driver, and I’m very happy to be launching the SHAABAN2F1 programme with his support, and in his home city which is the sporting and commercial hub of the Middle East before continuing my mission in my home city of Beirut.”

Sulayem said: “I’m happy to give any advice and help I can to Basil. The results he has achieved and the determination he has shown so far in his career suggest he has the ability to succeed in formula motorsport.”

Shaaban remains committed to A1GP for 2006-07. But with the A1GP season scheduled to conclude next April in the UK, and the British Formula Three International running between April and October, he will comfortably be able to fit both into his schedule.

“In fact, a second season of A1GP experience will help to propel me into my first full F3 programme with extra confidence and invaluable extra racing experience,” he said. Depending on his F3 results next year, Shaaban may embark on a second F3 campaign in 2008 to prepare him for the GP2 Series, the official F1 support and feeder series and the final step towards the elite Grand Prix platform.

Among those who have already successfully followed the trail from F3 to F1 are seven-times world champion Michael Schumacher, the late Ayrton Senna, Mika Hakkinen, and current stars Rubens Barrichello, David Coulthard and Jenson Button.

Sulayem, who has a personal friendship with Schumacher, Button, and several other top F1 drivers, said: “I talk to them quite often, particularly Michael, and I’ll be happy to pass on any advice, encouragement and practical help they can offer to Basil.”

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Shaaban has already received some high level acclaim. Martin Donnelly, the former Team Lotus F1 driver and a formula team manager for more than 10 years, said: “It is seldom these days that I come across a rookie driver as talented as Basil Shaaban. From what I’ve seen Basil possesses all the natural abilities to become the Middle East’s first big formula racing name.”

In a letter to Shaaban, F1 supremo Bernie Ecclestone told him: “I am happy to see that you are going to join GP2. This will be a positive way for you to show your talents to the Formula One teams.”

Shaaban entered motor sport when he took up kart racing – the launch platform for many F1 champions – as a 14-year-old in his native Lebanon, and developed his skills in the US after beginning university studies in California at the age of 19. By the time he had earned a Bachelor’s degree in Astrophysics at Berkeley four years later he had recorded a number of kart racing wins up to the highest level, Formula ICC.

His karting success led to formula racing trials and the chance to compete in the 2004 USA Formula Renault 2000 Winter Invitational. Later that year he moved to Europe to enter the British Formula Ford 1800 series where he became the first Arab winner in the category and was promptly invited to take part in A1 Team Lebanon’s driver evaluation programme.

After a rigorous series of tests in December 2004 he was selected alongside Khalil Beschir to represent his country in the World Cup of Motorsport. He then underwent a testing and 5-race programme in F3 and F3000 cars across Europe in preparation for the inaugural A1GP season.

Racing in five of the 11 rounds, he scored Lebanon’s best race finish of the season when he just missed out on a top ten spot out of 24 nations in Portugal. After the A1GP season concluded in April he continued his driving education by contesting four races in the National Class of the 2006 British F3 International series, recording two top-five finishes.

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