

13/04/1997

Biaggi the fastest

Harris Taib

PUT three-time 250cc champion Max Biaggi on any machine competitive enough, and he will prove that in the aggressive world of motorcycle racing, it is the rider and not so much the machine who earns pole position.

The 250cc race will start at 12.30pm. Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad will officiate the opening of the Malaysian Grand Prix today.

Italian Biaggi, astride a Honda this season after taking Aprilia to three world manufacturer's titles, clocked 1:25:380 to lead a three-Honda domination on the front row for today's race.

Tetsuya Harada, on an Aprilia, is the only rider to break the monopoly of the Japanese machines at the front when he qualified in second position.

In third and fourth places respectively are Benetton-Honda rider Tohru Ukawa of Japan and Chesterfield Elf Tech 3 Frenchman Olivier Jacque.

Biaggi on a Marlboro-Kanemoto Honda was consistent in setting the fastest times for both qualifying sessions.

His performance astride a new machine never looked compromised, and his character remained very much the aggressive man who had taken Aprilia to three manufacturer's titles.

"Compared to the other riders, we are in the worst condition. We have no experience with the machine, no data and everything is just so new," Biaggi said.

"However, we managed to find the correct settings for the Honda at Shah Alam and that helped us do some good lap times."

Biaggi said it was difficult to narrow down who would be his closest rivals in today's race or throughout the season.

"Harada, Ukawa, Waldmann and Jacque... all these guys are going fast. I know that for sure. But much will depend on racing conditions."

What Biaggi was sure of is that he and Honda would make a very tough lethal combination.

Asked how close the Aprilia of Harada will be to him throughout the season, as he has experienced the machine's superiority against the Japanese manufactured bikes, Biaggi said: "I don't know. You will never know until the race. But I cannot say I am not worried."

Harada, who is in a similar position as Biaggi having switched from Yamaha to Aprilia, was all praise for the Italian machine.

The Japanese should know as he spent most of the last two seasons chasing Biaggi who on many occasions just drew away.

"For sure the Aprilia is performing better than the Yamaha. Initially it was difficult to adjust to the bike but I am getting used to it everyday," Harada said.

Harada, who was the 250cc world champion in 1993, said the season looked very promising given the support of the team and manufacturer, but added that "every machine could prove to be a close rival".