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Grand Prix-Malaysia

DOOHAN CLINCHES MALAYSIAN GRAND PRIX TITLE

SHAH ALAM, April 13 (Bernama) -- Australian Michael Doohan began his campaign for his fourth consecutive world title in style by clinching the 500cc event in the Malaysian Motorcycle Grand Prix at the Shah Alam Circuit here today.

Doohan, who had three victories at the 3.505km track here but finished a poor fifth last year, claimed his 35th grand prix victory with his Honda machine by breaking the six-year-old lap record of one minute 25.100s.

He clocked 1:24.840s on the 13th lap in a wet condition, erasing the old mark set by American John Kocinski enroute to winning the first Malaysian Grand Prix in 1991.

Last year's runner-up Alex Criville of Spain kept his tussle for world title by taking the second spot, 11.796 seconds slower than Doohan's winning time of 47 minutes 11.545 seconds.

Nobuatsu Aoki of Japan, a rookie for 500cc, surprised even himself as he finished third ahead of defending champion, Luca Cadalora of Italy while Nobuatsu's twin brother Takuma ended in fifth position.

Japan's Tadayuki Okada, who took the pole position after setting the fastest time in the qualifying practice, had a poor outing when he could only finish 10th due to some mechanical problem with his bike.

"I picked the right tyres but I was not really pushing myself today. I tried to pull away from the others but I was quiet surprise as the Aoki brothers gave a strong challenge," said Doohan.

He said he did not expect an easy victory for him, adding that it was a good start for him at the season opener as he bid for a record fourth consecutive world titles.

The Modenas KR3 made a disappointing debut when both of its riders Jean Michel Bayle and Kenny Roberts Jr did not complete the race due to engine problem and rear tyre trouble respectively.

Three-time world champion Max Biaggi of Italy scored his fourth straight Malaysian Grand Prix title as he gave his Marlboro Kanemoto Honda team a spell-binding debut victory by dominating the season-opening 250cc GP from the first lap to the last.

Biaggi, who captured nine Grand Prix titles last season en route to his third consecutive world title, toppled Tetsuya Harada of Japan, the man who replaced him at Aprilia, by a gaping 14 seconds in the 31-lap race with a total time of 45 minutes 29.692 seconds.

Frenchman Olivier Jacque of Chesterfield Elf Tech crossed the line in third place while Ralf Waldmann of Germany, who finished second overall behind the Italian last year, came out fourth.

"This is a great result for me and the team," grinned Biaggi, who ran cut slicks front and rear on his Honda NSR. "I won here the last three years on an Aprilia... now I've changed my team and my bike - same result.

"It was a difficult race because the track was half wet and half dry at the start, the dry line was only 25cm wide in some places, so if you made a mistake, you would crash for sure. In those conditions it's hard to be confident about getting a good result. I had to risk quite a lot to win this race," he added.

Meanwhile, Italian teenager Valentino Rossi of Nastro Azzurro Aprilia, upstaged a late challenge by former champion Kazuto Sakata as he overtook the Japanese rider at the last corner in a neck-to-neck tussle.

Rossi, 18, whose only title last year was at the Czech Grand Prix, led

most of the race in damp conditions, only for Sakata to force by on the final lap, but the Japanese ran wide at the last turn, allowing Rossi through again.

The Italian was timed at 48 minutes 09.930 seconds in the 29-lap race, followed by Sakata 0.994 behind while another Japanese, Noboru Ueda came out third 32.198 behind.

"I was fast in the beginning but slowed down because of the weather... the bike was slipping due to the half wet track. Sakata made a hard brake at the end and I cut him," said Rossi who astride an Aprilia.

Sakata, who finished 10th fastest time in the qualifying, said a change of tyre gave a good race for him but a costly mistake in the last lap caused him the title. He also finished second in the 1991 Malaysian Grand Prix.

Malaysia's best hope Shahrol Yuzy of Team Petronas Sprinta TVK, failed to live up to the expectations as he did not finish the race due to a wrong strategy as he used the soft tyres hoping that the rain will be heavier.

Yuzy, astride a Honda RS, had to go out after the 17th lap but another Malaysian, Chao Chee Hou of Motosport Promotions showed his determination after completing the race in 20th place, one lap behind the winner.

Yang Di-Pertuan Agong Tuanku Ja'afar gave away the prize for the 500cc winners. Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad had officiated the race in the morning.

Over 40,000 spectators watched the race, the biggest ever since Malaysia hosted the event in 1991. The second leg of this year's 15-leg World Motorcycle Championship will be held in Suzuka, Japan next Sunday. --

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