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Dr M opens the Marlboro Malaysia Grand Prix '97

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IT WAS not the usual slow Sunday at Shah Alam yesterday. There was intense excitement as international high-powered bike riders went against each other for various crowns in this year's World Motorcycle Championship Series.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad officiated at the first leg of the event - the Marlboro Malaysia Grand Prix '97 - at the Shah Alam Circuit in Selangor.

Dr Mahathir pressed the button in the official box to mark the opening of the first leg of the world championship.

There were some show and dance routines before riders were given the chance to tame the 3.5km Shah Alam circuit's tricky curves.

Entertainers in the half-an-hour show included bands from Malaysia Airports Berhad and the Royal Malaysia Police, pom-pom dancers and chingay performers.

It was a good morning for spectators to witness the race as the tropical heat was absent due to the presence of thick clouds. But the on-and-off drizzle yesterday, possibly made the circuit more challenging than expected for riders.

The day's events started with the 125cc category. This was followed by the 250cc and 500cc categories, respectively. The favourites contending for the 500cc crown included Michael Doohan, Kenny Roberts Jr and Jean Michel Bayle.

Max Biaggi and Ralf Waldmann are among the attractions for the 250cc crown, and Garry McCoy and Ivan Goi for the 125cc title.

The Marlboro Malaysia Grand Prix '97 also saw the debut of the Modenas KR3 - a high-tech GP 500 motorcycle developed in a joint programme between the Marlboro GP team and the national motorcycle manufacturer.

Dr Mahathir, also the patron for the Malaysian GP, said in his address on the souvenir programme that he is confident such an event will help to promote and develop motor sports in Malaysia.

"The presence of top world riders, who will display their skills in competitive riding at the Shah Alam circuit, will encourage strong support from international and local motor sports enthusiasts," he added.

Meanwhile, MAB chairman Tan Sri Basir Ismail said in his address in the souvenir programme that the company looks forward to organising more world motorsport championships in the future.

The event saw the company's first involvement in the Malaysian Grand Prix.

Malaysia started hosting the Marlboro Malaysian Grand Prix in 1991, then organised by SAMP Sdn Bhd.

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