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Rossi grabs chance on Sakata's mistake

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YOUNG Valentino Rossi capitalised on a final corner mistake by Japanese Kazuto Sakata to win the 125cc category in the Marlboro-Malaysian Grand Prix at the Shah Alam Circuit yesterday.

The 29-lap race was so heatedly contested between the two, who were out manoeuvring one another every lap for the lead.

Sakata, astride a Aprilia, had overtaken Rossi going into the final lap of the race. Late on the brakes coming into the final corner, his machine slipped momentarily, but allowing just enough time for the 18-year-old Italian to pass and take the chequered flag.

"It was a very funny race," said Rossi, who rides for the Nastro Azzurri Aprilia team, during the post-race Press conference.

"The track was very slippery and Sakata made a mistake."

The damp conditions on the circuit forced even the leading riders to clock in above the 1 minute 40 second mark, which was 10 seconds slower than qualifying times.

Rossi, who qualified in pole position, did not appear to have a promising race when he had a bad start. But he regained his composition after the few opening laps.

"I had to go very fast at the beginning of the race. When I saw Tomomi Manako in front of me, I knew I could overtake him and break away to chase for the lead.

"Towards the end the race got slower."

In third place was Noboru Ueda on a Honda, followed by Italian Mirko Giansanti on another Honda, Aprilia's Masaki Tokudome, Spaniard Jorge Martinez and Manako.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad had officiated at the race which was coloured by a mardi gras parade, a chingay performance and marching bands from the Armed Forces and Police.

"The Japanese riders were very fast. To win in Malaysia was very important because the Japanese Grand Prix coming up will not be an easy round," Rossi said.

He intends to finish among the top ranking riders in his class this season, if not become champion, before even considering to ride in the 250cc class.

Aprilia has given Rossi the option to ride in the 250cc class next year.

Meanwhile, the unlucky Sakata said he was disappointed with himself for making a last minute mistake, but was nonetheless happy with his performance for the season's first round.

"We encountered many problems before the race which forced us to try so many different settings for the machine," said the Japanese who this year switched to Michelin tyres.

"I really thought I could win the race but I made a mistake."

Disappointment was also felt in the Petronas Sprinta Team TVK when Malaysia's best hope Shahrol Yuzy failed to finish the race and retired into the 11th lap due to wrong tyre choice.

The 21-year-old, who went out in full rain tyres, climbed as high as ninth in the classifications in the first few laps before dropping to 12th position and eventually last.

Instead, the dark horse in the Malaysian camp was Yamaha rider Chao Chee Hou who finished in 20th position.

Also retiring from the race was 1995 125cc Malaysian GP winner Garry

McCoy on the Aprilia.

German Peter Oettl who crashed twice during qualifying also returned to the pit to call it a day after 24 laps.