

14 OCT 1999

Sports-F1 (Preview)

CLASSIC BATTLE IN STORE AT MALAYSIAN GP ON SUNDAY

By: David Chelliah

SEPANG, Oct 14 (Bernama) -- Although McLaren Mercedes may just wrap up both the championship titles at the inaugural F1 Petronas Malaysian Grand Prix this weekend, arch-rivals Scuderia Ferrari are certain to give them a run for their money.

A strong showing here by McLaren at the expense of Ferrari will render the final race in Suzuka, Japan, on Oct 31 an academic exercise as far as the championship chase is concerned.

However, indications are that the battle will go the distance to Suzuka, the closing F1 race for the century.

Reigning world champion Mika Hakkinen of McLaren is leading the drivers' title chase with 62 points in a neck-and-neck battle with Ferrari's Eddie Irvine, who is just two points adrift.

A classic battle is definitely shaping up between Hakkinen and Irvine, who between them have captured half the season's races going into the 15th leg at the Sepang F1 Circuit.

Hakkinen will clinch the championship if he wins in Sepang and Irvine finishes no higher than fifth.

For Irvine and the renowned Italian team, Ferrari, it will be a do-or-die mission to win both the drivers' and constructors' titles from McLaren.

Ferrari are eight points behind leaders McLaren in the constructors' title standings.

"It is very unlikely for me or Hakkinen to screw things up at this stage of the championship. I have got the opportunities to do it now or never," said the 34-year-old Irvine who will move to Jaguar next season.

The surprise comeback of two-time former world champion Michael Schumacher of Ferrari has added excitement and glamour to the race, but his role will be just to pave the way for Irvine to win the drivers' title.

Ruled out from the title chase with only 32 points, the 30-year-old Schumacher will act as a pace-maker for Irvine.

"I want to score maximum points for the team and if I am in front, then I will allow Irvine to drive past me," said Schumacher who missed six GPs due to a broken leg suffered in the British GP in Silverstone on July 11.

If Schumacher is on song, he will act to foil Hakkinen in the combination of slow and fast corners of the 5.542km untested Sepang circuit.

For Irvine, he is determined to regain the drivers' lead and take a good cushion to Suzuka.

For Ferrari, Irvine is the number one driver, replacing Schumacher for the moment, and to show they mean business the team have brought in all their four best cars -- the Ferrari F399 V10 machines.

Ferrari general manager Jean Todt said the cars have been improved and are more competitive than before.

However, for McLaren, their MP4/14-Mercedes V10 engines are reputed to be the most powerful among the 11 teams in F1 action.

For Hakkinen, his speciality is on the straight, and the Sepang circuit provides such advantages.

David Coulthard of McLaren, who is in fourth position with 48 points, will also play a supporting role to Hakkinen who is aiming for his second consecutive title.

Both the leading teams in the series will certainly apply team tactics

and get astute pit-stop support from their crew in order to win the titles.

With the attention focused on Hakkinen and Irvine, other drivers could well sneak in to lift the Malaysian title in the heat and humidity, or wet tracks of Sepang.

Johnny Herbert of Stewart Ford, Heinz Harald Frentzen of Jordan Mugen-Honda and a resurgent Ralf Schumacher of Williams Supertec are among those capable of springing surprises.

The Sauber-Petronas team will do themselves and local fans a great turn if Jean Alesi and Pedro Diniz can make a podium finish for the first time this season.

The practice round will be held tomorrow ahead of the official practice on Saturday to decide the grid positions. The race proper over 56 laps will start at 2pm on Sunday.

Besides the much waited F1 race, supporting events like the Silverstone MBM-Zaifa Challenge and Proton Production Challenge will be held as a curtain raiser.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, the prime mover behind the Malaysian GP, will officiate at the opening ceremony at 11.30am on Sunday.

Drivers' Championship Standings:

-
1. Mika Hakkinen (McLaren Mercedes) 62 points
 2. Eddie Irvine (Ferrari) 60
 3. Heinz-Harald Frentzen (Jordan Mugen-Honda) 50
 4. David Coulthard (McLaren Mercedes) 48
 5. Ralf Schumacher (Williams Supertec) 33
 6. Michael Schumacher (Ferrari) 32
 7. Ruben Barichello (Stewart Ford) 19
 8. Giancarlo Fisichella (Benetton Playlife) 13
 9. Johnny Herbert (Stewart Ford) 12
 10. Mika Salo (Ferrari) 10
 11. Damon Hill (Jordan Mugen-Honda) 7
 11. Jarno Trulli (Prost Peugeot) 7
 13. Alexander Wurz (Benetton Playlife) 3
 13. Pedro Diniz (Sauber Petronas) 3
 15. Olivier Panis (Prost Peugeot) 2
 16. Jean Alesi (Sauber Petronas) 1
 16. Pedro de la Rosa (Prost Peugeot) 1
 16. Marc Gené (Minardi Ford) 1.

Constructors' Championship Standings:

-
1. McLaren Mercedes 110 points
 2. Ferrari 102
 3. Jordan Mugen-Honda 57
 4. Williams Supertec 33
 5. Stewart Ford 31
 6. Benetton Playlife 16
 7. Prost Peugeot 9
 8. Sauber Petronas 4
 9. Arrows TWR 1
 10. Minardi Ford 1
- BERNAMA
DC YBY