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Sports-F1 (Race)

EDDIE IRVINE WINS PETRONAS MALAYSIAN GRAND PRIX

By: David Chelliah

SEPANG, Oct 17 (Bernama) -- Ferrari's Eddie Irvine received a helping hand on two occasions from teammate Michael Schumacher to claim his fourth Formula One victory at the inaugural Petronas Malaysian Grand Prix here today.

In a drama-filled race at the 5.542km track at the Sepang F1 circuit, Irvine and Schumacher registered a one-two finish with reigning world champion Mika Hakkinen of McLaren Mercedes in third position.

The 33-year-old Irvine inherited valuable points to lead the championships for both the drivers' and constructors' titles, with pole starter Schumacher playing a pivotal role for the Briton's win here.

Two-time champion Schumacher, back from injuries suffered in the British Grand Prix on July 11, led the field with ease in the first three laps and allowed Irvine to overtake in the fourth.

After two pit-stops, Irvine was once again allowed to take the lead from Schumacher in the 52nd lap of the 56-lap race covering a distance of 310.352km.

Irvine, who will move to Jaguar next season, clocked 1 hour, 36 minutes and 38.494 seconds, a mere 1.040 seconds ahead of Schumacher and 9.743s better than title contender Hakkinen.

Hakkinen, who was in fourth position from the start, rose to third place after the 14th lap when teammate David Coulthard retired after his car developed mechanical problems and loss of hydraulic power.

The Flying Finn could not keep pace with the Ferrari pair right up to the chequered flag and ended with a time of 1:36:39.534s, trailing Irvine by four points for the drivers' title. The season comes to a close in Suzuka, Japan on Oct 31.

Schumacher admitted that it does not make sense for him to win here but preferred the title to go to Irvine. The 30-year-old German clocked 1:36:39.534s to stay in fifth position with 38 points in the standings.

Briton Johnny Herbert of Stewart Ford ended in fourth place with a time of 1:36:56.032s followed by teammate Ruben Barrichello with 1:37:10.790s.

Irvine, who has 70 points with the last race pending in Suzuka, made his debut in 1993 and won all his four GP titles this season from a total of 96 starts in his career.

"It was fantastic..Schumacher is still the number one and number two best. I made sure not to commit mistakes and the car was sharp on corners. I was worried about spinning and we control the base very well," said the jubilant Irvine.

About the cruncher in Suzuka, Irvine said the track was not "not a great circuit for me".

"We have the potential to do the same in Suzuka and win both the titles," said the Italian team driver.

Ferrari also led the constructors' standings with 118 points to McLaren's 114 while Jordan were in third position with 58 points.

The race began under hot and humid conditions, with the peak track temperature hitting 42 degrees celcius.

Schumacher and Irvine started from the front row and trailing them were Coulthard and Hakkinen.

The focus was on the first four leaders while the others were left behind with a series of spin-offs and former champion Damon Hill of Jordan hit from behind to end his campaign in the opening lap's first corner.

At the end, only half of the 22 drivers continued on to finish the race.

Jean Alesi of the Malaysian sponsored outfit Sauber Petronas finished seventh with a time of 1:37:32.902s while teammate Pedro Diniz retired at the 44th lap.

Jarno Trulli of Prost Peugeot did not make it to the starting grid when smoke billowed from his car in the warm-up lap.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad gave away the trophies to the podium finishers.

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