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Excitement at Sepang ends in controversy

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SEPANG, Sun. - The Sepang F1 Circuit was in a sea of the Ferrari red today after one of the most controversial F1 races ever at the inaugural Petronas Malaysian Grand Prix.

In an exciting race, and one which will live long in the memories of those who saw it, Scuderia Ferrari driver Eddie Irvine took the chequered flag first followed by team mate Michael Schumacher.

Everyone thought it was a victory that would increase Irvine's chances of winning the drivers' world championship title from Finland's Mika Hakkinen and Ferrari fans rejoiced.

For several hours after the race ended, the RM286 million circuit was a scene of celebrations which had never been seen before on Malaysian soil, and one that may now become an annual affair.

During the prize presentation ceremony in which Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad presented the trophies to the winners, Ferrari fans at the grandstand area rushed to the circuit's paddock to cheer on their heroes.

But their joy was shortlived.

Four hours after the race ended, and with thoughts of an exciting ending at the Suzuka circuit in Japan for the next race, the International Automobile Federation announced that the Ferraris had been disqualified.

The reason was a ruling that the cars driven by Irvine and Schumacher did not conform to the authorised technical specifications.

It was a rather sad ending to a wonderful race which was held under perfect weather conditions. The sun blazing throughout the day provided an excellent setting for the drivers and the fans to enjoy the first ever F1 race in the country.

Malaysia is also only the second venue in Asia to hold the race.

In fact, the Malaysian GP will also be remembered most for its excellent staging by the organisers of the international event.

The day started early for many, rushing to the circuit to beat the anticipated congestion on the roads leading to it. In fact, there was no traffic jam as the police and the Sepang International Circuit marshals ensured that traffic was smooth.

A carnival atmosphere was clearly evident at the circuit, and the red of the Ferrari was the dominant colour.

At 11am, Dr Mahathir officiated the opening ceremony of the F1 race before he went on a flying lap of the circuit in a vintage Mercedes Silver Arrow.

The armed forces, the air force and the navy later joined in the opening ceremony with a parachute show, a march past and also a fly-past by of the RMAF's F-18 Hornets.

Half an hour before the race, and with the stands already full with spectators, the teams positioned their equipment and cars at the starting grid with the Petronas Pit Girls, dressed in traditional costumes, holding up the drivers' car numbers and national flags.

At 2pm, the signal lights went off at the starting grid and the cars roared away to the first corner and into the history books.

No doubt, the first Petronas Malaysian Grand Prix will be remembered more for what happened on the track than off it.

But Malaysia had stamped its mark on the world motorsports scene and left an indelible mark on the memories of the F1 fans who came.

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