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Fun for 'Fast Eddie'

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AUSTRALIAN Grand Prix champion Eddie Irvine yesterday described the newly-built Sepang F1 Circuit as a challenging but fun circuit which could stretch F1 drivers' skills to their limits.

Irvine, who went for an afternoon spin on the 5.542km circuit in an open-top Ferrari F50, said the track was very safe and its overall feel was 'medium-fast', similar to the Austrian A-1 Ring circuit in Europe.

"It is very good and fun to drive on. However, I can't say how it compares to other F1 tracks as I have only tested it with a sports car. Wait until I try it with an F1 car," the Irishman said at the KLIA Pan Pacific Hotel in Sepang.

Irvine, who scored his maiden GP win in Melbourne last Sunday, was in Malaysia with Scuderia Ferrari Marlboro team manager Stefano Domenicali and Press officer Claudio Berro to check out the circuit before attending the official launch by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad last night.

As Ferrari's No 2 driver to Michael Schumacher, Irvine will be among the F1 drivers scheduled to race in the penultimate leg of the FIA Formula One World Championship in October, the first ever to be staged in Malaysia.

Irvine was impressed with the way the circuit is built and found the corners particularly challenging, especially the 180-degree turns.

However, a local reporter who accompanied him on a spin around the track said Irvine appeared unfazed at all, smiling all the way, at times asking him if he wanted to go any faster without bothering to look at the speedometer.

This he did while negotiating the 180-degree turn at the east-end of the grandstand at a speed in excess of 200kmh, claimed the reporter.

He noted that Irvine took the whole 5km lap in one minute 37 seconds, accelerating to a speed of 280kmh at the grandstand where the track is straight for up to one-kilometre.

At Ferrari, Schumacher is the recognised team leader and Irvine must obey orders to support him and help his title charge.

Last year, Irvine said he let Schumacher pass him five times to win races during the season but that policy could change if Irvine finds himself in a better position this year.

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