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Hakkinen dubs Sepang track as tough

REIGNING world champion Mika Hakkinen of Finland predicted that the first-ever Malaysian Formula One Grand Prix at the newly-built Sepang F1 Circuit in October will be demanding but thrilling.

The McLaren Mercedes driver said the hot and humid conditions would be the biggest problem for the drivers with the world championship at its penultimate stage.

"It's going to be very interesting to compete on the new circuit. But the biggest problem is the heat," he told reporters after a test drive at the Sepang F1 Circuit yesterday.

Hakkinen, known as 'The Flying Finn' in the motor-racing fraternity, said he had had enough experience competing in such conditions and was ready to meet the challenge.

"In the 1991-92 season, I competed in hot and humid Mexico as well as another experience in South Africa in 1991. So, I know how it feels like," said the 30-year-old driver.

Malaysia will be staging their first ever leg in the FIA Formula One World Championship on Oct 17, the second last leg of the 16-leg championship and the second Asian country after Japan to host it.

After testing the new circuit in a Mercedes SLK 230 for about four laps, the Finn said he liked the circuit because of the corners and described it as demanding.

"Definitely, I like to have my team study the circuit before taking part. You have to learn every aspect of the track but above all, it will be very exciting to come here in October," he said.

Hakkinen, who made his Formula One debut in 1991 and has 113 Grand Prix starts to his credit, said Sepang was able to 'maintain the exciting features and characteristics of the track while not compromising on safety.'

"It will be spectacular for over-taking as the straights are very long, there are twists and turns, and the entire course is very hilly. This will make for a thrilling race in October."

He said he was confident of reaching 160kph within 3.5 seconds from the start, to achieve a top speed of 310kph.

Hakkinen also attended the opening of the Sepang F1 Circuit by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad last night.

In the season-opening Australian Formula One Grand Prix in Melbourne on Sunday, Hakkinen failed to perform as he had to retire after completing 21 laps due to a mechanical problem.