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Quiet start to Proton Merdeka race at Sepang

SEPANG, Sat. - It was a quiet day at the Sepang F1 circuit today as only a small number of spectators turned up for the qualifying rounds of the Proton International 300km Merdeka Race.

However, the organisers were confident the crowds would be much bigger for the final rounds tomorrow.

In an effort to make the event more attractive, a full-blown carnival consisting of fun activities, stage performances, exhibitions and contests are being held during the two-day event.

There were also special appearances by Disney mascots, jugglers, stiltwalkers and illusionists. Artiste Amy, formerly of the popular rock group Search, also took the stage to entertain the crowd.

On the track, the lack of spectators did not stop the racers from trying their best to lead the grid in tomorrow's race which will be flagged off by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

Among the 146 drivers who took part in the qualifying rounds was mariner Datuk Azhar Mansor.

Azhar, who recently sailed solo around the world on a new East-West-East route in 190 days, teamed up with brother Azmi in a Proton Putra 1.8cc for Team Walls-USPD in the Class A category of the main race.

He said he had always been interested in racing and had in fact competed in several races in the 1980s.

Since he had been away at sea for the last eight months, Azhar used the qualifying rounds as a practice run.

"It will be like when I was sailing round the world. It's a matter of determination and focus," he added.

As for tomorrow's race, Azhar said he would do his best.

Azhar qualified in the 24th place and will be starting on the 12th row of the grid in the 55-lap race.

Defending champion Keifli Othman, with teammate Zureen Zulkifli from Genesis World Racing Team, will start at the front row of the grid.

The overall winner of the Merdeka Race will receive a Proton Satria GTi and the Prime Minister's Challenge Trophy. The class A winner will also receive RM7,000.

Last year, the event attracted a crowd of 40,000 although the race was held using just half of the 5.542km-long circuit.

A separate Proton Satria GTi race will be held as the model, built using Proton's latest technology, is deemed too powerful to race alongside the Wiras, Putras and smaller Satrias in the main race.

Qualifying rounds for the superbike race, Catamaran F150 Superkart race and the Proton Putra Celebrity race were also held today and the finals would be held before the main race.

Tickets, which are available at the circuit, are priced at RM15 (grandstand), and RM8 and RM6 for the other areas.

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