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Ferrari's double after 21 years, thanks to Schumacher

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SEPANG, Sun. - On a day of drama and excitement, Michael Schumacher put the icing on Ferrari's cake today when he won the Malaysian Grand Prix to give his team the double for the first time in 21 years.

Only two weeks after winning the drivers' championship in Suzuka, Japan, the 31-year-old German gave a display of masterly control and cool handling of his hot rod in front of 90,000 Formula One fans at the Sepang International Circuit, dubbed the Home of Motorsports.

McLaren's David Coulthard was second while Schumacher's teammate, Rubens Barrichello, third.

McLaren's Mika Hakkinen, who was made to undergo a 10-second penalty in the pit stop for a jump start, clawed his way back but could only manage fourth place.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, speaking to reporters after the race, said the Grand Prix could bring the country RM1 billion in foreign exchange earnings.

Dr Mahathir also praised the SIC management for once again successfully staging the Grand Prix. Malaysia had its first Formula One race last year, which was said to have grossed foreign exchange earnings of RM500 million.

Dr Mahathir said there were more people watching the F1 race this year compared to last year.

"Last year, I was not sure if (SIC chairman) Tan Sri Basir Ismail could do the job. But now, he has passed with flying colours and I am confident that he can extend the good job when we host the Malaysian GP in 2001," he said.

Dr Mahathir was asked a host of questions, including how he thought SIC could cope as it would be staging the 2001 race in March next year - just five months away.

He said more than 90,000 spectators attended the F1 racing spectacular compared to last year's 80,000.

Although the official figure has not been ascertained, Dr Mahathir said 82,000 tickets were sold before the race.

As the Sepang race is also the last in the calendar - last year's event was the penultimate leg before it was concluded in Japan - Dr Mahathir believed the foreigners would extend their stay in the Federal capital.

"I understand that some of the teams have decided to keep their equipment here till March. So we could see them spending more time in Malaysia," said Dr Mahathir.

The 2001 season will start in Australia with Malaysia hosting the second leg.

Both races will be held in March and it appears sensible for the teams to keep their machines and equipment in Sepang as Malaysia is nearer to Australia compared to Europe.

Dr Mahathir also said Malaysia was training its young racers with the hope that they would compete in F1 races one day.

"We need to start with the go-kart first, and then graduate. It may take time but we need to start early," he said.

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