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Merdeka Millennium race a roaring success

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THERE'S no doubt that the Merdeka Millenium Endurance 12-hour race, the first of its kind in Malaysia, which ended at the Sepang F1 International circuit at noon on Thursday was an overwhelming success.

More than 25,000 avid fans, excluding the teams and their entourage, witnessed the event. The turnout was bigger than the crowd at any local race including the Proton Merdeka Race and even the last World Motorcycle Grand Prix which was staged at the same venue.

Even Prime Minister, Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad rushed from the Merdeka Day parade in Shah Alam to make an unexpected visit to grace the event, although the reason could be that his son Mokhzani was one of the 165 racers.

Surprisingly, Mokhzani who registered himself as Jani Che Det (the last name was Dr Mahathir's pen name during his student days) came out fourth in a Mitsubitshi EVO-6 with partners Aminuddin Omar and Adam Azman.

Disappointingly, there were not enough sideshows, even food and beverage to keep the tired, hungry and thirsty crowd who thronged the Sepang F1 Circuit from as early as 6pm, six hours before the flag-off, to stay till the finish.

The race revellers were great. They cheered when the drag racing began and this was followed by a stunt driving show parading Proton's latest model Waja.

They got into a party mood when popular local songstress. Siti Nurhaliza, appeared on stage before the racers were flagged off at midnight.

The crowd stood to attention when Siti sang the national anthem, Negaraku, and got into a frenzy when the racers took their grid positions in front of the grandstand.

But the euphoria could not be sustained throughout the whole race. The organisers must look into the event's weak points if they want to turn the Millenium race into the stature of the world-famous Le Mans and the Daytona 24-hour races.

Timesport, stayed awake throughout the race - making checks at 1.30am, one hour and twenty minutes after the flag-off and again at 3.30am at the grandstand.

We also conducted a survey at the car park area to assess how many spectators were still at the circuit, at 6.30am, just before daylight broke.

During the first check, we found that most of them were still around. Some hung around the one kilometre long double-frontage background, still keeping tabs of the racers who by then had completed up to 30 laps around the 5.542km circuit while others loitered at the mall.

A few vintage cars were on show, besides some merchandising stalls and no more than five food and beverage outlets.

Cold drinks were sold for RM2.50 a cup and fruits were on sale at RM2 a packet which was not only expensive and limited in supply.

By 3.30am, the crowd had dwindled to less than one-fifth of the initial number, some sprawling on the seats to rest their tired bodies while others tried to catch a wink or two, even with their helmets on.

The 6.30am check revealed that there were actually more people around as no less than 500 cars were seen outside the main entrance.

When the Prime Minister arrived at 11.30pm, there were more than 5,000

people around.

Since it was the first edition of the Millenium 12-hour race, it could have been more succesful with just a little more foresight.

The organisers are planning a 24-hour race next year and necessary measures should be taken to make it a runaway success.

If this happens, we could even attract some of the Le Mans and Daytona regulars to race alongside the locals in Sepang and be the talk of the world motorsports fraternity.

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