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Mapei sound warning

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PRETENDERS for the title in the 2001 Telekom Malaysia Le Tour de Langkawi were given a glimpse of what to expect from World No 1 Mapei-Quickstep after Paolo Lanfranchi cruised to win the Langkawi Classic race in Kuah yesterday.

Lanfranchi, overall individual champion in the 1999 Tour, timed 1:34.43 hours in the 64.4-kilometre round island race, an event which served as a prelude to the 12-day Tour starting in Alor Star tomorrow.

Among the list of credible climbers in the field, 33-year-old Lanfranchi showed his class when he ended the race five seconds ahead of second placed Francesco Secchiari of Saeco.

His teammate Dario Cioni was 17 seconds behind the leader for third position.

"I'm very happy to win this race but it's not the end of the Tour," said Lanfranchi.

"This victory shows that Mapei is a very good team and it proves that we have a good chance to win in every race."

Mapei, thrice overall winners in 1997-99, are expected to go on a head-to-head battle with defending champions Mercury-Viatel from United States.

Sports Minister Datuk Hishammuddin Hussein, who represented the Tour's patron Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, presented the prizes.

There was also good news in the Malaysian camp as Lee Robert ended third in the second pack of arrivals, to finish sixth overall behind Nathan O'Neil (Ceramiche-Panaria) and Jorg Ludewig (Saeco).

"I'm very happy to see that Malaysian riders are willing to fight it out with the pros. This result is very good motivation for the team," said national coach Albert Soloyan.

Malaysia will compete in the special Asian individual and team overall categories against defending champions Japan, China, Indonesia and multi-national invitational outfit Telekom Malaysia.

The big names in the sprinter's field, who were expected to shine in yesterday's flat race, took a back seat as Ivan Quaranta (Alexia Alluminio), Massimo Strazzer (Mobilvetta) or Federico Colonna (Cantina Tollo) were not in the top-30.

There were no jerseys and world championship points awarded to the winners of the Classic.

A total of 175 rider representing 25 professional and national teams will take part in tomorrow's Stage One, a 182-kilometre route from Alor Star to Sungai Petani.

Though the King of the Mountain stages will only begin on Wednesday, the opening race will comprise three Sprint points in Kangar, Tunjang and Gurun.

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