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Sports-Powerboat (F1)

PODIUM FINISH FOR LAITH PHARAON OF SAUDI ARABIA

By: Asan Ahmad

JOHOR BAHRU, Feb 25 (Bernama) -- Laith Pharaon of Saudi Arabia set the pace for the 2001 season of the UIM F1 Powerboat World championship with a podium finish in the first leg of the championship held at Tebrau Straits, here today.

It was the first podium finish for the Saudi who started his full season race after the 5th leg in France last year.

He won the race with a total time of 55:30.52s to collect 20 points.

Pharaon, however, did not start the race well, trailing in the first ten laps of the race. After finding his touch and handling his boat in a more comfortable manner he surged ahead to lead the race until the final 28th lap.

Pharaon, on board the Hyatt Hotels and Resorts Racing team, completed the two-day race for 60 laps including the laps he made during the official practice held earlier.

"This victory is a good way to start for the 2001 season. I am more confident now and there will be no looking back," said Pharaon.

He said since arriving here they had had problems to get their engine in perfect condition. They worked very hard to overcome it and finally produced something for the team to be proud of.

Last season was not a perfect outing for Pharaon. During the Abu Dhabi leg, he blew his boat and then in Turkey he was out of control and collapsed.

The retirement of defending world champion Scott Gillman after the 4th lap of the race indeed paved the way for Pharaon to go for a podium finish.

Gillman who recorded the fastest time in the qualifying had to retire from the race due to engine problem.

Another favourite Guido Cappellini of Assicom team Italy also retired when his steering failed after a crash with Malaysia's Loi Kong Yau in the 9th lap.

Loi was the first to withdraw from the race when his boat submerged after the incident at the last turn of the "track".

With Gillman and Cappellini out from the race, the battle for the top three finishers belongs to Francesco Cantando of Italy and Sami Selio of Finland.

Cantando of Singha Beer Racing Team who finished 2nd overall last season was unable to repeat his feat. He had trouble with his engine in the early stages of the race. Although it got better, it was already too late for him to pick-up and had to settle for third place behind Sami Selio of Team Exide Finland -- which was a surprise victory for the Fins.

Cantando finished the race in 55:32.00s while Selio clocked 55:32.34s for second place.

"It's not a good start. I am unlucky here. things did not go smoothly. I got engine problem from the start of the race which affected my pace. When the engine did perform it was already too late," said Cantando.

"It's a good way to start before the next leg...and I think there should be no more blunders," he added.

With the victory, Selio is in second place for the overall standing with 15 points while Cantando with 12 points was third.

The Arab-Malaysian sponsored driver Philippe Dessertenne of France who made a promising start in the race only managed a fourth position clocking 55:35.35s which earned him 9 grand prix points.

Two Malaysian drivers -- Loi Kong Yau of Caltex Havoline and Simon Saw of Wircom-Malaysian did not finish the race. Loi collapsed his boat after the 9th lap while Simon did not start when his boat was leaking after the official practise held earlier.

The next leg will be held in Portugal in April.

Today's race was witnessed by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

More than 100,000 spectators turned up at Tanjung Puteri to watch the race.

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