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Mahathir leads nation's challenge in Rotax

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MAHATHIR Bob Ngaau is leading Malaysia's chase in the 2002 Rotax World Finals as the main favourites begin to pull away from the rest of the field at the end of the official timed practice sessions at the Morac International Circuit in Langkawi yesterday.

Despite finishing fourth in the Malaysian Max Challenge, 34-year-old Mahathir Bob posted Malaysia's fastest time of 1:02.741 minutes in the last of three 15-minute practice rounds to emerge as the best local candidate to make the Finals top-32 qualifying cut today.

Placed 11th in his group, Mahathir Bob, an expatriate from New Zealand who holds a Malaysian racing license, said:

"I didn't expect to be the fastest of the Malaysians but I am confident of securing a place in the finals. I only ended fourth in the qualifiers because I had too many problems last season, but I've been working out and lost 10kgs in the last two months because it's not always that I can compete at this level.

"I'm still not happy with my karts settings. I think I can go much faster tomorrow."

It was 18-year-old Matthew Hamilton from New Zealand who set the standard with a time of 1:01.624s. The son of 54-year-old John, who ended 14th overall at the inaugural World Finals in Puerto Rico last year, Hamilton Jr is only 0.096 seconds ahead of second-placed Matthew Wall of Australia.

"I think dad, who is my mechanic, had something to do with me being fastest today (yesterday)," said Hamilton. "I should be able to improve tomorrow (today) but I expect the main threat to come from the Australians and South Africans."

Hugo van der Ham from Holland checked in third after posting 1:01.900s, followed by South Africans Ricky Pedrigoa (1:01.985) and Claudio Piazza-Musso (1:02.185s) in the fourth and fifth fastest respectively.

Meanwhile, Rodney Magness emerged as the second-fastest Malaysian with 1:03.498s.

Martin Druhan, an Australian expatriate who is representing the host-nation in the over-35-year-old category, timed 1:03.504s. Early favourite and winner of the Max Challenge Ferhan Fauzy, who is having problems with engine settings, could only secure 1:03.454s.

Unfortunately, Raja Razman Idris, Malaysia's top-competitor at last year's Finals in Puerto Rico, could only manage 1:05.326s as he is suffering from muscle strains on his ribs.

Today's qualifying rounds will comprise four 20-minute official timed practice sessions (10am-12pm) and six 15-lap heats (1-6pm). The 25-lap Finals, to be launched by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad tomorrow, will also get live television coverage on RTM1 beginning 2pm. zark@nstp.com.my

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