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Sports-F1 (Qualifying)

ALONSO STUNS FAVOURITES TO GRAB POLE POSITION

SEPANG, March 22 (Bernama) -- Unheralded Fernando Alonso of Renault secured the pole position for tomorrow's Petronas Malaysian Formula One (F1) Grand Prix as he stunned the more experienced drivers at the Sepang F1 Circuit, here, today.

The 21-year-old Spaniard grabbed his first-ever career pole position as well as dethroned Ferrari's Michael Schumacher as the "king of pole" at Sepang. The German world champion was the pole winner in the previous four Malaysian GPs.

Alonso, who came out as the 11th car on the track after finishing 10th in yesterday's first qualifying session, clocked one minute 37.044 seconds in the single-lap qualifying, a new feature introduced by the International Automobile Federation (FIA) this season.

It was really a great day for Renault as their two drivers will occupy the front row for the first time in their short history as Jarno Trulli finished second with 1:37.217s, just 0.173s behind Alonso.

Schumacher, two-time winner here in 2000 and 2001, will start the race in second row alongside Australian GP winner David Coulthard of McLaren Mercedes. Schumacher completed the 5.543km lap with 1:37.393s while Coulthard recorded 1:37.454s.

"It is a very special day for me. I was aiming for a good place on the grid but expected to see my name slipping down the list at the end of the qualifying. But it didn't happen and I got a great surprise when Michael finished his lap," said Alonso, now the youngest ever driver to clinch pole position in F1 history.

Alonso, who started racing at the age of seven, was in his second season as an F1 driver after driving for Minardi two years ago. He finished 13th at the 2001 Malaysian GP and last year was a test driver for Renault.

"I have still not completely realised that today I have my first pole position, just at the second race of the season. I am simply delighted and very confident that tomorrow we can finish well this weekend, scoring some points for the team," he added.

Schumacher's teammate Rubens Barrichello, who finished the qualifying in fifth with 1:37.579s, will be in the third row tomorrow with Nick Heidfeld of Sauber Petronas on his right. Heidfeld was timed at 1:37.766s.

Another McLaren driver, Kimi Raikkonen, will start the race in fourth row alongside Williams-BMW's Juan Pablo Montoya. Raikkonen clocked 1:37.858 whilst Montoya 1:37.974.

Defending champion Ralf Schumacher of Williams-BMW, will only start from the second last row in the race day tomorrow with Jos Verstappen of Minardi Cosworth. The German, who had a 1-2 finish with teammate Montoya here last year, finished 17th in 1:38.789s.

His elder brother, Michael, was not disappointed even though his reign as the "king of pole" at Sepang was finally ended.

"It is a surprise with the Renaults. I don't want to take any credit away from them, but at the end of the day we care what happens in the race. The way the rules are, you have to focus on the race.

"But I must thank the guys for doing such a good job to get my car ready, after I had a gearbox problem in the warm-up. I was happy with my lap and third was the best I could do today. I hope we have the right strategy for the race," said Schumacher, who finished fourth in Melbourne two weeks ago.

Renault team boss Flavio Briatore was also delighted with Alonso's and Trulli's front row achievement, a first for the team in their second year of appearance in the F1.

"Fernando and Jarno did a fantastic job. This is a dream. We may be not ready to win races yet but we are back," Briatore said.

Alonso described his lap as a normal one even though he admitted that in the sweltering heat today, it was very difficult to beat his time.

"The lap was a normal lap. It wasn't a fantastic lap but it was not a disaster like yesterday when I did a few mistakes. But today was a normal lap and when I crossed the line I saw the time and I said to myself this time is maybe good at the end of the session because a 37 zero will be a good time, difficult to beat.

"But when qualifying was finishing, with the last five or six cars, I thought that maybe I would finish qualifying fifth or sixth. But then the cars went down and down and in the end I saw Michael's lap and when he crossed the line I thought I'm on pole position. It's a very strange feeling," said Alonso, who was born in Oviedo, Spain.

The race tomorrow will be held over 56 laps with a distance of 310.408km. Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, who is on leave, is scheduled to open the 2003 Petronas Malaysian Grand Prix.

-- BERNAMA

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