



## **STAR MAZDA GRADUATES MAKE HISTORY ON A HISTORIC MOTORSPORTS WEEKEND – RAHAL AND MATOS WIN IN ST. PETE, McDOWELL MAKES A BIG IMPACT IN TEXAS**

Graduates of the Star Mazda Championship presented by Goodyear made history – and, in the case of 2004 Star Mazda champion and rising NASCAR Sprint Cup star Michael McDowell, a big impact – this weekend in Florida and Texas.

IndyCar Series driver Graham Rahal, a member of the Star Mazda class of '05, became the youngest driver to win a major open-wheel race – the historic first race of the new Champ Car/Indy Racing League 'unified' era, the Grand Prix of St. Petersburg. Rahal was just 19 years and 93 days old on Sunday; the previous record-holder was another Star Mazda graduate, Marco Andretti, who was 19 years and 167 days when he won at Infineon Raceway in 2006.

Rahal becomes just the fourth driver in history to win in his first IndyCar Series start and the fourth rookie to win in their first IndyCar Series season. He is now 4<sup>th</sup> in the IRL championship points battle while Andretti is 5<sup>th</sup> (which happens to be where they both finished in the 2005 Star Mazda Championship standings).

In the Indy Lights event on Saturday, 2005 Star Mazda champion Raphael Matos, qualified his #27 Automatic Fire Sprinklers Inc./Andretti Green Racing car on the pole (his second of the season) and led every lap on his way to victory. Nor was he the only Star Mazda Championship graduate on the podium; Logan Gomez, who ran with the series in 2006, finished 3<sup>rd</sup>, a feat made all the more remarkable by the fact that he started dead last. Other Star Mazda Championship alums in the Indy Lights field include Andrew Prendeville, Robbie Pecorari, James Davison, Pablo Donoso, Sean Guthrie, Logan Gomez and Micky Gilbert.

In the Indy Lights championship battle, ten of the 27 drivers listed are Star Mazda Championship graduates; Matos in 2<sup>nd</sup>, Guthrie 9<sup>th</sup>, Prendeville 10<sup>th</sup>, Gomez 13<sup>th</sup>, Gilbert 15<sup>th</sup>, Davison 18<sup>th</sup>, Donoso 19<sup>th</sup> and Pecorari 22<sup>nd</sup>. In 25<sup>th</sup> is Tom Weiringa and in 27<sup>th</sup> is Jon Brownson.

The Other Star Mazda Championship graduates in action recently, and making names for themselves in their respective series include ALMS drivers Gerardo Bonilla, co-driver of the #8 BP Lola B07/46-Mazda MZR-R LMP2, as well as Bryan Willman, Chris McMurry, Pierre Ehret and Doug Peterson. Marco Andretti and Rafael Matos also belong on the list as they are doing double-duty, racing both open-wheel and sports cars.

In the Grand-Am Rolex series, the list of Star Mazda grads includes Mark Patterson, Joey Hand, Guy Cosmo, John Pew, Brian Frisselle, Mark Wilkins, Brad Jaeger, Colin Braun, Graham Rahal and Michael McDowell.

McDowell, now racing full-time in the NASCAR Sprint Cup for Michael Waltrip Racing in the #00 Aaron's Dream Machine Toyota, scored the biggest publicity bonanza of all with his fiery, barrel-rolling wreck in qualifying at Texas Motor Speedway. Video replays seem to show his car starting to slide when it hit oil dry put down from a previous incident; McDowell attempted to correct but his car slammed into the SAFER barrier, flipped onto its roof and rolled at least eight times before coming to rest. Although he quickly hopped out of the car and waved to the crowd, pit road remained hushed as competitors marveled at McDowell walking away essentially unscathed (<http://youtube.com/watch?v=PrfpWhLOTfY>).

"I have two feelings about it — one is that I want to be in the media spotlight for the right reason, and that's for being a good race car driver and running well," McDowell said Saturday. "The

second part of it is that you'll take it whenever you can get it. Especially with the way this sport is right now. We don't want to go out there and wreck cars to get on TV, that's never the plan. But if you're going to do one as spectacular as we did ... we'll definitely soak up as much as we can get."

Despite the severity of the accident, McDowell, who was the 2007 ARCA RE/MAX 'Rookie of the Year' and finished second in the championship, has the full support of his team.

"He's certainly not the first driver to put a car into the wall," said MWR general manager Ty Norris. "He's been testing for us since last September. He has raced Nationwide races for us, he has raced truck races for us and that is the first time he's ever hit the wall. He's been phenomenal in the fact that he hasn't bent one piece of sheet metal until yesterday. He's proven to us that he deserves a chance."

Racing his backup car on Sunday, McDowell finished 34<sup>th</sup>, which keeps his #00 Toyota a guaranteed starter for the next race. Texas was McDowell's second start in a NASCAR Sprint Cup race; he qualified 34<sup>th</sup> and finished 26<sup>th</sup> last weekend at Martinsville. Other Star Mazda Championship alumni in NASCAR include NASCAR Nationwide driver Brad Coleman, who finished 22nd in Texas and is currently 18<sup>th</sup> in series points. In the NASCAR Craftsman Truck Series, Colin Braun, who, like McDowell, went on to race Daytona prototypes, is currently 20<sup>th</sup> in the championship battle, while Scott Speed, who went from Star Mazda to become the most recent American driver in Formula One, is 30<sup>th</sup>.

Over the past seventeen years, the Star Mazda Championship presented by Goodyear has grown into one of the most prolific and successful driver development series in all of auto racing. This year's prize fund approaches \$1.5 million and includes a full-season sponsorship from the MAZDASPEED Motorsports Development Ladder for the 2008 Star Mazda series champion to move up and race in the 2009 Atlantic Championship Powered by Mazda.

"The Star Mazda Championship presented by Goodyear offers an opportunity to race in the United States in one of the most successful and affordable manufacturer-supported driver development series," says Star Mazda Championship founder and President Gary Rodrigues. "The Star Mazda Championship is also a gateway series to many other forms of racing because once you learn to drive an open-wheel car competitively, it becomes much easier to adapt to – and excel in – other kinds of cars. Graduates of the Star Mazda Championship have gone on to salaried rides in F1, IRL, Champ Car, prototypes, sports cars and stock cars. As this weekend's results clearly demonstrate, the racing world is full of successful Star Mazda graduates and we're proud of them. But we also look forward every year to a new class of young hotshoes who will be the racing stars of tomorrow."

For more information on the Star Mazda Championship and its drivers, as well as the Mazda Motorsports ladder system, please visit [www.starmazda.com](http://www.starmazda.com) and [www.mazdausa.com](http://www.mazdausa.com).

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