



From left, Jason Saini, Dane Cameron, Joel Miller, Connor De Philippo, Gerardo Bonilla and Brad Rampelberg have all experienced the benefits of Mazda's racing system.

» THERE IS NO arguing that 2008 has been a tough year for amateur racing, as spiking gasoline prices and a sagging economy kept a lot of racers home. But there's a bright spot: Mazda claims that more than 9,000 amateur racers still compete in its cars in NASA, SCCA and other series.

No manufacturer courts amateur racers as aggressively as Mazda does, and according to Robert Davis, senior vice president of Mazda North America and head of the racing program, that translates to sales of both cars and performance parts.

"This program is at the heart of what we strive for, making motorsports accessible to as many people as possible," says Davis, who drives an RX-8 in NASA and SCCA competition.

FAST ROAD

MAZDA OFFERS AMATEUR RACERS A STEP-BY-STEP PATH TO SUCCESS

BY STEVEN COLE SMITH

Mazda's promote-from-within support system has always been there, says Jim Downing, a pioneer in Mazda racing and a five-time IMSA champion, "but they've just made it more structured, more formal." Downing, who began racing the Mazda rotary engine in 1974 in an RX-2, built Mazda-powered cars under his Kudzu banner. "The company has always rewarded its teams and drivers with help," he says.

The ladder system, created in 2006, has two paths: one

for open-wheel racers and one for sports-car competitors.

On the open-wheel side, there are three scholarships. One kart racer gets a full season in the Skip Barber National Series Presented by Mazda. The Barber National champion moves up to the Star Mazda series, and the Star Mazda champ gets a season in the Atlantic series.

On the sports-car side, there are two opportunities. Following an end-of-season shoot-out at California's Buttonwillow Raceway, the

winner of a NASA or SCCA national championship will be given a new MX-5 Miata and the parts to build an SCCA Pro Racing MX-5 Cup car. And the winner of the MX-5 Cup championship gets a ride in the SCCA Pro Racing Speed World Challenge Touring Car series.

Last year's shoot-out winner was Brad Rampelberg, now 40, of San Jose, Calif. He was one of nine NASA and SCCA champs invited to participate. Rampelberg's prize package included a 2008 MX-5, all of the Mazdaspeed parts needed to prepare the car for Cup competition, a Sparco racing suit and helmet, eight sets of Kumho tires and entry-fee waivers for all eight rounds of the 2008 SCCA Playboy Mazda MX-5 Cup, a prize valued at \$50,000. This year's shoot-out is Dec. 9.

Rampelberg finished sixth in the 2008 series and had raced Mazdas for five years before winning the scholarship. "Mazda takes care of its racers like no other company does," he says. "I couldn't have made it as far as I have without their help."

Rampelberg won twice in 2008, but the championship went to Eric Foss, 34, of Fort Worth, Texas, who earned the Speed World Challenge Touring Car ride with Mazda in 2009. "It's a great system," Foss says. "I could never afford to go pro racing on my own."

Jason Saini, 30, also of Fort Worth, won the Speed Touring Car ride for 2008 and was named the series' rookie of the year. In November, Saini was one of several young Mazda drivers testing at Daytona International Speedway, auditioning for a ride in the Rolex 24 Hours of Daytona with Sylvain Tremblay in the SpeedSource RX-8, the race's defending GT-class champion.

"I honestly can't see how any aspiring racer wouldn't choose to race a Mazda with the program they have in place," Saini says.

Although Gerardo Bonilla, 33, isn't a formal graduate of the official ladder system, the Orlando, Fla., resident's career track was a template for the current arrangement. He began by autocrossing his first car—a used 1990 Miata—and worked his way up through open-wheel series to a championship in the Skip Barber Formula Dodge series in 2005. He rejoined Mazda in 2006 in the Star Mazda series. In 2007, he was the champion of the Mazda-powered IMSA Lites series, and in 2008, he co-drove Mazda's LMP2 entry

in the American Le Mans Series, the BK Motorsports Lola. (There is no word yet on Mazda's 2009 ALMS program, now that BK owner Bob Bach announced that he is retiring and shutting down his operation.)

"Mazda is the only company with a genuine ladder system to develop young and up-and-coming drivers," Bonilla says. "Mazda doesn't just sponsor and support a variety of driver-development championships; their people are at the races, checking on the drivers, giving out scholarships to graduate champions of their series."

The most successful ladder graduate has been open-wheel racer Raphael Matos, who won the Atlantic Championship title in 2007, then moved to the Firestone Indy Lights series and won three races and the championship, along with \$246,000 in prize money. And though the Indy Lights series is powered by Infiniti-based engines, Mazda still considers him part of the family.

"Raphael is the first driver to have participated and won in all levels of the Mazda ladder," Davis says. "He started out in karts, which Mazda now supports; he graduated to the Skip Barber pro series, now presented by Mazda, and ran two years in Star Mazda" before moving to Atlantic. Matos also logged a class win at the 24 Hours of Daytona and a Grand-Am Prototype win at Miller Motorsports Park in September. He is, inarguably, a professional race-car driver now.

"The ladder system works," Davis says. "You have to put your money where your mouth is, and I think we do." 🍀



Get Out and Drive MX-5 SCHOOL IS THE START LINE

» THIS IS THE bottom rung on the Mazda ladder, the easiest place to start and a good place to learn if racing is something you really want to do. It is not cheap, but fender-to-fender competition never is.

We attended the three-day Skip Barber Mazdaspeed MX-5 racing school at Sebring International Raceway in Florida and now await a call from Newman-Haas or Hendrick Motorsports. (Is this phone on? Am I getting a signal?)

The school uses Mazda MX-5 Miatas—some five-speeds, some six-speeds—outfitted like the Barber Mazdaspeed Challenge cars that run in regional races. In fact, they are the same cars. Barber spends about \$10,000 modifying them with a full cage, a racing seat and five-point harness, proper gauges, brakes,

tires, Koni shocks, a header and a Supertrapp muffler used for equalizing the speed of the cars. Add or subtract a plate in the muffler, and horsepower goes up or down by two or three.

Our class was led by the legendary Terry Earwood, Barber's head instructor in the Southern region, the winningest driver in the Firestone Firehawk Endurance Series and an accomplished standup comic. ("Gauging trailing-throttle oversteer is like prunes. Are two enough? Are four too many?")

There's a minimum of classroom time and a maximum of seat time both on the track and on an autocross course. Instructors are skilled at bringing along beginners without hamstringing the more experienced students.

By the end of the third day, we had practiced side-by-side starts, were allowed to pass and had managed to get the 200-hp cars up to about 120 mph on Sebring's back straight. Since the MX-5 has two seats, the instructors can ride with you, and you can ride with them as they show you the line.

If you graduate from the school (which costs \$3,399 at Sebring and up to \$3,999 at pricier tracks), you qualify for an SCCA regional racing license. Add a lapping day, and you're ready for a regional Barber Mazdaspeed race weekend, an arrive-and-drive experience that costs \$2,999 for qualifying, warm-up and two races.

You can find more information online at www.skipbarber.com.