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Wheldon showcases Mazda Road to Indy at Indianapolis Motor Speedway

Indianapolis Motor Speedway (Sept. 6, 2011) -- Dan Wheldon bounced and beamed like a child waiting to open their Christmas presents. "Can I go out now? Are you guys ready? Can I go now?" he asked everyone in sight.



Though at Indianapolis Motor Speedway, Wheldon wasn't getting ready to race in the Indianapolis 500. He wasn't even hopping into his own car, instead sliding into Spencer Pigot's Cooper Tires presents the USF2000 National Championship powered by Mazda car and speeding down the road course.

He told the Andretti Autosport crew he was only going to run two laps to warm up the car. After 10 laps, it was clear the reigning Indianapolis 500 champion was having a good time.

Wheldon came out to the track to give media a taste of the cars of the Mazda Road to Indy, the developmental talent program of the IZOD IndyCar Series. The three-rung program consists of the Cooper Tires presents the USF2000 National Championship powered by Mazda, the Star Mazda Championship presented by Goodyear and Firestone Indy Lights.

The program grew in exposure this past weekend, when all four series raced at the inaugural Baltimore Grand Prix. As in the IZOD IndyCar Series, each step of the ladder has a championship that is awarded to the driver who accumulates the most points throughout the season. Whoever wins the championship gets a scholarship, sponsored by Mazda, to move up to the next series.

"For a couple of years there, there were so many different ladder systems," Wheldon said. "What I think is great now is that they are embracing the ladder series system. It's very definitive and you can bounce your way through the different levels."

Wheldon climbed up his own form of a ladder system back in his development days, competing in the F2000 Series and Indy Lights before moving up to the big cars in 2002.



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Pigot's 2-liter car was most similar to what Wheldon drove in F2000, and he took it around the track at 1 minute, 31:49 seconds.

Team Pelfrey's No. 11 car, which will be driven by current Star Mazda Championship contender Connor De Phillippi in his upcoming race, took to the track next. He bested the less powerful USF2000 car with a time of 1:29:19.

As the drivers move up the ladder, the cars increase in weight, power and size, giving the drivers an increasingly realistic experience the closer they get to the IZOD IndyCar Series. Wheldon noted that each rung adds something vital to the driver's development.

"It would be no good to go from the USF2000 car straight to the Indy Lights car," Wheldon said. "The Star Mazda car gives you the grounding of being able to adjust the traction control and settings, so it's a great middle ground between the other two."

Note: to see YouTube video of Wheldon driving the Star Mazda car around the Indy Motor Speedway road course, click [here](#).

Wheldon next hopped in the Firestone Indy Lights car of Belardi Auto Racing's Anders Krohn. After posting a 1:25:38 lap time, Wheldon looked up and commented, "I liked that. I liked that a lot."



"In the Indy Lights car, you start to feel the weight like the IndyCar," he said. "That's the most relevant feel that you get. It's that big, kind of heavy car. Those other two, they're training grounds and they're stepping stones, but you can see why the Indy Lights car is that last rung before the big times."

A full-fledged developmental system bodes well for the future of open-wheel racing in North America.

"From a team owner's standpoint, it's very clear who is very good and who isn't because there's not tons of different ladder systems nearest to the top," Wheldon said. "For a driver, it's good, too. My personal opinion is when I have great teammates that brings the best out in me. When you have a ladder system, the best of the best are in the same series, and you know if you compete well and you win you're going to move up."

"I think for all intents and purposes, it's what needs to be done. I hope that they will stick with this ladder series system for a long time because it works."



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For more information on the Star Mazda Championship and its drivers, as well as the Mazda Road to Indy, please visit www.starmazda.com and www.mazdausa.com. For information, interviews and photos, contact Star Mazda Communications Director Peter Frey at (818) 398-5733 or StarMazdaPR@aol.com.

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On any given weekend, there are more Mazdas on the road-race tracks of America than any other brand of vehicle. At the track, you'll see MX-5 Miata, RX-8, MAZDA3, MAZDA6, RX-7 and other vintage Mazda models competing, because every Mazda has the Soul of a Sports Car. For more information on the various Mazda spec series, visit:

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