



ZACH VEACH TALKS ABOUT MAKING THE TRANSITION FROM STAR MAZDA TO INDY LIGHTS

Ever since my start on the Mazda Road to Indy developmental ladder system with Andretti Autosport, starting with racing USF2000 in 2010, I've been looking forward to climbing each rung of the ladder. Ultimately the IZOD IndyCar Series being my end goal, but I have always been most eager to get behind the wheel of a Firestone Indy Lights car. After two seasons of USF2000 and a season of Star Mazda, I finally

had my chance – and a nice title came with it.



In August, I had the opportunity to be the first driver to have raced in USF2000, raced in Star Mazda, and tested an Indy Lights car. That would have been impossible to do without the Mazda Road to Indy platform.

As we made the announcement and I went to the Andretti shop to pour a seat, just sitting in the car the first time it had a very different feel to it. Being a bigger car, you would think there would be more room – not in this case.

The cockpit of the Lights car took some getting use too – the wheel, bars, switches, everything is tightly together and closer to the driver – but it did take one of the biggest bags of seat beads to get me high enough in the car. Believe me, I'm trying to grow!

The biggest difference was how the pedals felt in the car, in the USF2000 car and the Star Mazda, they are both high-nosed cars, meaning your legs lay straight or even upward reaching the pedals, but in the Lights car, it's more like the seating position in a street car. Under the drivers knees you have this big hump where the bulkhead is, and then the pedals are down and a little forward from that. I took some getting use to using more of my lower legs to drive the car instead of the whole leg but I was excited ether way to get the car on track!

My first test in the Lights car was at Putnam Park in Indiana. I've always been looking for more downforce and more horsepower, and continually found myself overdriving the smaller cars. With my first laps in the Lights car, I felt right at home – *finally!*

Everything about the Lights car demands respect but at the same time, taunts you to be aggressive as possible. At first, it took my mind a little to get adjusted to the raw speed of the car – things seemed to be





happening so much faster than the Star Mazda – but with each lap, I was able to get more and more comfortable and able to start feeling the cars limits.

A big thing I noticed right off the bat was how much feel the Lights car had: From traction, to how the car set in the middle of the corner, it was telling you everything you wanted to know. Every adjustment, from bars to actual setup changes, the car responded. That's the connection I've been looking for ever since I had my test days in a Formula Atlantic car – it worked and responded the way I thought it should, and wanted to.



One of the things the car never let me forget is just how much horsepower it had. In the F2000 car and the Star Mazda car, you never had to worry about your throttle too much. If the car didn't have too much understeer off of the corner, you could go straight back to full throttle at the apex. In the Lights car, that wasn't the case – with 400 horsepower, it was easy to be a little too overly aggressive at times.

Another thing I fell in love with was the great braking ability of the car. When you wanted it to stop, it stopped, and as the test progressed, that was one of the things I had to work on. I needed to use less brake and roll more speed into the entry of the corner. Which is one of the things I've been trying to get myself to *stop* doing the past three years.

As the lap times dropped, I also learned that the Lights car isn't very forgiving. If you miss the line by the smallest amount, it can be a big moment. I found that you just have to be as precise and as smooth as possible with this car and it'll do the rest.

Once I broke past that wall of holding my breath and having the fear, “Is it going to stick,” I learned how much speed the Lights car can actually carry through the corner – and man, my eyes were open. When you have the downforce at high speed, and brand-new set of sticky Firestones, the only thing you can do is grin because this car is on rails and you can push it like nothing I'd driven before. I found myself at the end of the day only 0.15sec off of the track record. Seems like the laps that feel the slowest and the least exciting are the fastest.





After the Putnam test, it was onto Indianapolis. In a way, it was a dream come true, being at the speedway in an Indy Lights car for Michael Andretti. I have to say I wanted to be on the oval, but May will come soon enough. It was still a great honor to cross the bricks on the road course.

Taking what I learned from the test, I just wanted to progress at the Indy test and see where I stacked up with the other drivers. Just get more seat time and learn with the car, especially being the very low-downforce setup because of the long front straight.

I wasn't expecting to be P2, a tenth off of Peter Dempsey in the first session, but that gave me a lot of confidence for the afternoon. My engineer and I just focused on working more entry speed into the corners and getting the most out of the car. In the second session I was able to do that, We grabbed P1 by a half a second on the very last lap, a long with the new track record. The second day of the test went in the same paces as the first – in the morning we were P2 to Dempsey and in the afternoon, I was able to be on the top of the charts with a new track record, a second and a half quicker than last year's.

Getting the opportunity to drive the Lights car was really an honor for me, and being able to set the track record at the Indianapolis Road Course leaves me short with words, but one I'm sure of is I wouldn't have been able to do it without the Mazda Road to Indy program. Everything I've learned from each step has prepared me to drive an Indy Lights car, just like the Indy Lights car will prepare a driver to compete in the IZOD IndyCar series. I'm proud to be a part of such a great program with a great team and a great school in K12. I'm definitely looking forward to next season. The dream is to compete in the Firestone Indy Lights Series but like every driver, we have a lot of work to do this winter to make that happen.

Chat with you again soon. Thank you for reading.

-Zach

