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British Driver Is Thankful For Racing with American Team

PALMETTO, Fla., Nov. 21 — As people across the world reflect on their blessings this holiday season, at least one British race car driver is doing the same.

Jonny Baker, a 23-year-old who lives in the hamlet of Farnham Common, Buckinghamshire, took on the challenge of racing in the United States this season, joining a team that was new to him to compete in a series unfamiliar to him and on tracks across the United States and Canada that he'd never before seen.

Baker, who was accustomed to winning races in his native country, didn't win a single race in this year's Star Mazda championship presented by Goodyear. Still, he says Andersen Racing made it the best year of his life.

"I learned an awful lot about myself this year, living in another country away from family and friends, but everybody at Andersen Racing made sure that I had the best year of my life," he said recently. "Dan Andersen runs a very professional team that has a family-like core to it. If I were just here on my own it would have been a long year, but it wasn't anything like that; the time just flew. The whole team is made up of an amazing bunch of people!"

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Based in Fairfield, N.J. and Palmetto, Fla., Andersen Racing is unique because it competes in three different series in order to offer the best training available for up-and-coming open-wheel drivers. Its first level is the F2000 Championship Series, where it often fields as many as five cars. Baker competed on the next level, Star Mazda, which has more powerful race cars and coverage on SPEED. The third step on the Andersen Racing ladder is the Indy Pro Series, the official development series of IndyCar, where it is the farm team for IndyCar team Rahal Letterman Racing. The Indy Pro Series races are broadcast on ESPN2.

When he made the decision to spend 2007 racing in the States, Baker was making the proverbial jump into the deep end of the pool.

“Before I came to America I was intimidated by the size of the country,” Baker admitted. “After all, the United Kingdom can fit inside Texas. But I got used to that very quickly.”

One thing he wasn't expecting was how much fun he had racing in the States.

“The atmosphere at the races is very different than it is in England,” Baker said. “It's very friendly in America, and much more laid back. It's more family-like. There were occasions when you just wouldn't enjoy the atmosphere racing in England because it was so intense. Don't get me wrong, I was happy to be at the races, but it's much more fun in America. It was great!”

Before coming to America Baker placed ninth in the 2006 UK Formula Ford Championship with two podium finishes. He finished second in the 2005 UK Formula Ford Scholarship Cup with four victories, placing fifth overall in the national class. He finished second in Class B of the British Racing Drivers' Club Single-Seater Championship in 2004 with four victories.

Although Baker got more podiums in Great Britain, he said he learned a great deal on and off the track this year in the States that was just as valuable.

“I learned an unbelievable amount of technical things with Andersen Racing,” he said. “I've driven for two fantastic teams in England, but with Andersen Racing I learned about both driving and the technical side of things. It will stand me in very good stead for the future no matter what I do.”

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"I spent a lot of time with my engineers, Mike Reggio and Jake Ware," he continued. "I'm sure that [team manager] Michelle [Kish], [crew chief] Roger Morissette, Mike and Jake will be extremely glad to see the back of me for awhile after I tripped over their feet all year long!"

"I have to thank the crew who worked on my car," he added. "John Poulter was fantastic to work with. He really cared about how I did, and that meant a lot to me. In addition, Steve Fried, who was my mechanic for the majority of the year, was simply awesome."

Baker said the team valued his input.

"They were always open to suggestions," he said. "We would sit in the back of the trailer with John Poulter for hours discussing things. It was such a comfortable environment; I never felt scared to voice my opinion. We looked for solutions to problems together. They helped me methodically attack a problem from a technical point of view. Even when I was wrong, they explained why something wouldn't work. It was an environment that encouraged learning, which was what I needed. Drivers really have to work on the technical things, and this helped me a great deal."

Andersen Racing's three-step ladder system helped too. All of its full-season drivers receive a test at the next-highest level at season's end, which Baker took advantage of in October when he tested an Indy Pro Series car for the first time.

There are other benefits of being part of a team that is so deep.

"Terrick Mansur [one of Andersen Racing's F2000 drivers] came over and tested a Star Mazda car, and we tried to help him adapt to it," Baker pointed out. "When Jonathan [Goring] and I tested the Indy Pro Series cars, Andrew Prendeville [an RLR/Andersen Racing Indy Pro Series driver] was on hand and gave us tips to help us."

"Dan had me come to some of the F2000 races and help some of the F2000 kids," Baker continued. "It's a very transparent system between the three different teams."

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Another benefit the team has is its new 1-mile test track in Palmetto, Fla. "It's an awesome facility, and it's only going to improve Andersen's ladder system," Baker said.

A great deal has been written about the differences in driving styles in Europe versus the United States. Baker agreed that the attrition levels are often higher in Europe's open-wheel support series, but he said the Star Mazda championship was by far the most competitive series in which he's participated.

"The competition was just unbelievable in Star Mazda," he said. "You had to be on top of your game every single session. The top 15 drivers usually qualify within one second of each other. The driving is as strong and competitive as anywhere."

Baker had to get up to speed as quickly as possible on tracks he was seeing for the first time each racing weekend.

"The tracks in Europe are much more modern in design, as most have been built or updated to F1 status," Baker explained. "There are lots of big runoff areas and lots of long straightaways followed by 90-degree corners. The new tracks in Europe are getting away from the long, flowing road courses like you have in America."

Like everyone, Baker has his favorite facilities. "In terms of track layout, VIR [VIRginia International Raceway in Alton, Va.] was my favorite," he said. "In terms of atmosphere, I thought Road America [Elkhart Lake, Wis.]; the Petit Le Mans [Road Atlanta in Braselton, Ga.] and the Sebring 12 Hours [Sebring International Raceway in Sebring, Fla.] were the best. All the Champ Car and ALMS [American Le Mans Series] weekends were very fun.

"On the track, there were some good moments for me, like at VIR, Miller Motorsports Park [Tooele, Utah], Portland [International Raceway] and Mosport [Bowmanville, Ontario, where he posted his best finish, fourth]," Baker remembered. "However, there were also some character-building moments for both myself and the team. That's what racing is all about though, and one simply has to learn from all the misfortunes. I made some mistakes this year which were deeply frustrating, but the team was always there for me, and for that I am in their debt."

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Baker said his driver coach, Bryan Sellers, was a big help too. "He's a very personal and interactive coach," Baker said. "He helped me a great deal. I'm definitely a stronger person mentally because of things he taught me. I hired him on Michelle's recommendation, and that was probably the best thing I did all year."

Baker said he didn't mind being directed by a woman team manager. "She does a really good job," he said. "No one should underestimate the amount of work she does. She really cares and she's unique, that's for sure. Dan and Michelle are two friends I won't be forgetting."

What lies ahead for Baker?

"I'd love to come back and do Star Mazda with Andersen Racing again," he said. "It all depends on the budget. I'm looking for funding, and a lot has to do with the economy. With the strength of the pound, racing in America makes a lot of sense. All I can wish for is that I have an opportunity to return next year with this fantastic team and give them something to show for their outstanding efforts and skills."

For more information on Andersen Racing, see andersenracingteam.com and andersenracepark.com. For more information on Baker, see jonnybaker.net.