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HAWKSWORTH GOES AWAY STRONGER FROM 'DAMAGE LIMITATION' OVAL DEBUT AT THE NIGHT BEFORE THE 500 ROUND OF THE 2012 STAR MAZDA CHAMPIONSHIP

Jack Hawksworth admits that his oval racing baptism in the fifth round of the 2012 Star Mazda Championship at Lucas Oil Raceway 'didn't go to plan', but he stresses that he has come out of the weekend 'stronger' for the experience and is still very much 'in the driving seat' in the chase for the coveted crown.



A newcomer to the US racing scene this year following a hugely successful national and international karting career and a front-running maiden single-seater campaign in Formula Renault UK in 2011, Jack headed to Lucas Oil Raceway for the high-profile 'Night Before the 500' brimful of optimism after storming immediately into the lead of the Star Mazda title

standings courtesy of a brace of victories and two second places in the first four outings at St. Petersburg and Barber Motorsports Park.

In-keeping with the race's status as the *blue ribbon* event on the calendar, a flurry of media and fan activities preceded the competitive hostilities, which conversely were crammed into barely 24 hours, leaving very little time for the drivers to actually catch their breath.

What's more, as the current Star Mazda pace-setter, Jack was invited to lead the formation laps for Friday evening's Indy Lights Freedom 100 at nearby Indianapolis Motor Speedway, an honour that the talented young Bradford-born speed demon confessed was 'really special and exciting' and 'a huge buzz' in front of tens of thousands of spectators thronging the legendary Brickyard's packed-out grandstands. It was also, he noted, 'a great testament to the brilliant job Team Pelfrey has done so far this season'.

Moving on to the serious business, despite having shone by lapping a close second-quickest on his oval testing debut around the tricky, 0.686-mile Lucas Oil Raceway three weeks earlier, Jack knew from the moment he took to the circuit for the opening practice session that it was going to be a character-building weekend.

"Oval racing is a strange entity," reflected the 21-year-old British Racing Drivers' Club (BRDC) Rising Star. "One day you can be right on the pace; the next, miles away. Whilst in testing we were very fast, the race weekend didn't go to plan and we definitely underperformed. As soon as we put the car down on the track for Friday practice, we were struggling with oversteer and didn't have the pace – we weren't remotely where we thought we were going to be.



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“We always seemed to be just outside the window, and then we made matters even tougher for ourselves in qualifying. We each had two warm-up laps followed by two ‘flying’ laps. On one of my warm-up laps, I went faster than anybody else and I thought we were really on the money, but then the tyres went off sooner than I had expected and I ended up going two tenths *slower* on my flying lap, leaving us on the back foot for the race.”

Lining up ninth on the starting grid for the 67th annual ‘Night Before the 500’ – just over a third of a second shy of the benchmark – Jack initially conceded some ground before gradually settling into a rhythm and grittily battling his way back to seventh position at the chequered flag, ensuring he left Indiana with a 12-point championship lead over last year’s Star Mazda runner-up.



“My first time racing on an oval was always going to be a learning curve,” mused the highly-rated Cullingworth hotshot. “It requires a very different style and being in the middle of the pack, I perhaps didn’t always make the best decisions on where to go on the racetrack in the early laps, but I learned a lot as the race progressed and managed to get my head round it in the end. The main thing is that we got safely to the finish and salvaged something from the weekend.”

After staying on for the 96th edition of the legendary Indianapolis 500 the next day – quipping that it was ‘like watching 33 missiles...I honestly don’t think I’d ever seen cars driven that fast’ – Jack has now turned his attentions fully towards the following outing on the 2012 Star Mazda schedule at ‘flat-out’ Iowa Speedway. Having taken the positives away from Lucas Oil Raceway, he is adamant that second time around, he will be infinitely better-prepared.

“I’m glad we’ve got the first one out of the way,” concluded the TORGOEN Swiss brand ambassador, “and I feel stronger and a better driver for it. I feel much more confident going into the next oval race, and I know that as soon as the green light goes out at Iowa, even though I’ve never been there before, I’ll be able to place my car in exactly the right position every time.

“I’m convinced we’ll be able to come out fighting there. My championship lead might have been cut, but we’re still in the driving seat, and I don’t see any reason why I can’t go to Iowa and extend my advantage – and then after that, we’re going back to street courses, on which we have already proved we can excel...”

You can keep up-to-date with Jack’s latest career news and results at www.jackhawksworth.co.uk and on Twitter at <http://twitter.com/Jackhawk91>

