



Coming to Grips With Grip – Drivers and the Radial Tire Learning Curve

Session three of the promoter test days at Sebring leading up to Round 1 of the 2008 Star Mazda Championship presented by Goodyear is still a tight battle among the group that established itself as the front runners during Monday's sessions – but with a pair of drivers now down into the 1:59s, its obvious that some are mastering the radial tire learning curve just that little bit quicker.

Joel Miller, the 2007 Skip Barber Champion racing with JDC Motorsports in the 2008 Star Mazda Championship courtesy of a full-season sponsorship from the MAZDASPEED Motorsports Driver Development Ladder was in the top-3 in both sessions on Monday, but moved to the top of the time sheets during the overcast Tuesday morning session with a lap of 1:59.653 (111.322 mph) in the #20 JDC/Skip Barber Mazda. Second, also a top runner yesterday, was 16 year-old driver Tom Gladdis of Gibraltar, U.K. with a lap of 1:59.984 (111.015 mph) in the #5 Andersen Racing/Law firm of Marrach & Co./Allied Mazda.

Irishman Peter Dempsey, who topped the times yesterday, was third in the Tuesday morning session with a lap of 2:00.172 (110.015 mph) in the #21 Andersen Racing Mazda. Fourth in the morning with a lap of 2:00.839 (110.229 mph) in the #00 Jig-A-Loo/Andersen Racing Mazda was Quebec racer Yannick Hofman, whose best placing on Monday was 10th.

"I ran a couple of races and did several days of testing on the bias ply tires that the series used last season, and the driving style required by the radials is very different," said Hofman. "It was easy to go fast on the old tires and you could go even faster by driving harder. With the radials, its harder to go fast, and once you get there, trying harder results only in slower lap times. Car setup and smooth driving with smaller slip angles is much more important."

Rounding out the top-5 was Nick Haye, the second-year driver who finished 4th in the 2007 championship. He was quickest in the morning session on Monday, but his best lap in the #4 JDC Motorsports/Quantum Sphere Mazda in the first session on Tuesday was 2:01.004 (110.079 mph). As was the case on Monday, the fastest of the three female drivers in the field Tuesday morning was Juliana Gonzalez of Mexico City, who was 13th on the time sheet with a lap of 2:02.509 (108.727 mph) in the #11 Andersen Racing Mazda, about half a second faster than her best Monday time.

The quickest Expert Series driver picking up three seconds from his Monday time, was Chris Cumming of Vancouver, B.C. with a lap of 2:02.905 (108.376 mph) in his #16 World Speed Motorsports Mazda. Gerry Kraut, a co-owner of JDC Motorsports, was again the fastest Master Series driver with a lap of

2:04.371 (107.099 mph) in the #55 Dougherty & Co. and Dougherty Funding LLC Mazda.

The second session of the day was conducted under cloudy skies that promised, but did not deliver, rain. It did, however deliver cooler track temperatures than the morning session, and, consequently, times a tick or two slower. No driver broke the 2:00 barrier as they did in the morning session, and Joel Miller wound up with the fastest lap of 2:00.635 (110.416 mph). Next on the list was Tom Gladdis at 2:01.018 (110.066 mph), followed by a new name among the front runners, Englishman Charles Hall. He has been just outside the top-5, in 6th place in each of the first three sessions, but moved up to 3rd with a lap of 2:01.256 (109.850 mph) in the #77 Andersen Racing / Pardoes Solicitors / Allied Mazda.

Alex Ardoin, well off the pace in 18th in the morning session, found the sweet spot in the afternoon with a 4th-fastest lap of 2:01.646 (109.472 mph) in the #51 Mundill Racing / Oral and Facial Surgery Center Mazda. Rounding out the top-5 was Peter Dempsey with a lap of 2:01.675 (109.472 mph). Proving they will be a force to be ultimately to be reckoned with in qualifying and the race were a pair of Brazilian drivers making their first appearance near the top of the time sheets. In 6th, with a lap of 2:01.714 (109.437 mph) in the #52 Mundill Racing / State of Santa Catarina Mazda was Rick Rosin. Just a tick behind him in 7th was Ernesto Otero, driving the #18 JDC Motorsports / Brazilian Green Beef Mazda to a lap of 2:01.912 (109.259 mph).

As in previous sessions, the fastest female driver was Juliana Gonzalez with a lap of 2:03.646 (107.727 mph), but immediately behind her and finally getting comfortable with her car was Kristy Kester, half of the brother/sister Kester Racing team. Her lap of 2:03.663 (107.713 mph) in the #48 Kester Racing / Texas World Speedway / Unifirst Mazda was good for 18th in the 27-car field.

Chris Cumming was again the fastest Expert Series racer with a lap of 2:03.242 (108.080 mph), followed by Master Series driver Gerry Kraut, turning a time of 2:03.594 (107.772 mph).

This concludes two days of 'promoter testing,' with the first official practice session of the weekend scheduled to take the green flag at 12:40 pm on Wednesday, March 12. Qualifying is scheduled for 1:20 pm to 2:05 pm Thursday, March 13. Round One of the 2008 Star Mazda Championship presented by Goodyear will take the green flag at 2:50 pm, Friday, March 14.

with the top drivers in the field separated by bare hundredths of a second in both the morning and afternoon sessions.

The first session, taking the green at 8:05 am with the sun just barely risen, was intended as a way for new drivers to feel their way around the track and take the measure of the brand-new Goodyear radial racing tires that are making their debut at this event. Instead, the young hotshoes had the pedal to metal pretty much from lap 1. After an hour of track time, and three red flags in quick succession in the closing laps, Coming in second was Hot on his heels was Tom Gladdis, the 16 year-old European racer from Gibraltar who confirmed the speed he showed in early-season testing

Rounding out the top-5 were Irish driver Peter Dempsey, a rookie to the Star Mazda series who also impressed in pre-season testing. His lap of 2:01.712 (109.439 mph) was good for fourth on the time sheet. Finally came Louisiana native Alex Ardoin, who won his first race in the final Star Mazda Championship race of the 2007 season at Mazda Raceway Laguna Seca. He turned a lap of 2:02.208 (108.995 mph) in the #51 Mundill Racing/Oral and Facial Surgery Center Mazda.

The fastest of the three female racers in the field was “We had a very good car in the morning, even though it was cold and the tires took a long time to come up to temperature. The team is working well together and we’re expecting the afternoon session to be much more physical as the temperatures and speeds come up.”

Occupying the 9th spot on the time sheet was Master Series driver (age 45 and older) The fastest of the Expert Series drivers (age 30 to 44)

The second one-hour session of the day took the green at 1:20 pm in the afternoon, and the names were familiar, but the order was dramatically different. Peter Dempsey, fourth in the morning session, moved to the top of the order with a lap of 2:00.141 (110.870 mph). “We should have been a second a lap faster, but I went out on the same tires we used in the morning session to gather some data about how the tires perform as they wear. We’re happy with the car, and it will probably take another two seconds to get the pole when we finally qualify, so there’s lots of room for improvement.”

Tom Gladdis, third in the morning session, moved up to second on the time sheet with a lap of 2:00.177 (110.837 mph), just a couple of hundredths off the top pace. He swapped places in the order with Joel Miller, who put in a best afternoon lap of 2:00.491 (110.548 mph), almost half a second faster than the first session. Nick Haye, fastest in the morning, just missed the ideal setup and dropped to fourth in the afternoon with a lap of 2:00.969 (110.111 mph). Rounding out the top-5 was Eric Freiberg, 7th in the morning session, with an afternoon lap of 2:01.618 (109.523 mph).

Chris Cumming was the fastest Expert Series racer in the afternoon with a lap of 2:02.033 (109.151 mph), while Gerry Kraut maintained his position atop the Master Series time sheet, improving a few tenths with a lap of 2:03.763 (107.625 mph). Juliana Gonzalez remained the fastest female in the field with a lap of 2:03.054 (108.245 mph), though she dropped to 14th in the order.

With times so close at the front of the field, the second day of promoter testing promises even more excitement and close racing. There will be two 35-minute sessions on Tuesday, March 11, beginning at 10:05 am and 4:50 pm. Official practice begins on Wednesday, with qualifying scheduled for 1:20 pm to 2:05 pm Thursday, March 13. Round One of the 2008 Star Mazda Championship presented by Goodyear is scheduled to take the green flag at 2:50 pm, Friday, March 14.