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Back to Fast Forward – The drivers of the Star Mazda Championship presented by Goodyear return to action this weekend at Miller Motorsports Park

The unique mix of top-flight open-wheel drivers that make up the Star Mazda Championship presented by Goodyear – with a few new faces thrown in for good measure – go back to their fast-forward battle at this weekend at Miller Motorsports Park. After a two-month hiatus resulting from re-scheduling caused by the unification of Champ Car and the Indy Racing League, Round Two of the 2008 championship will take the green flag at Miller Motorsports Park on Saturday, May 17.

Included in the 30-car mix are racers from the U.S., Canada, Mexico, Brazil, Ireland and Gibraltar, as well as drivers ranging in age from 16 to 64, a father/son team and a brother/sister team. Leading the pack coming in to the Miller weekend is 'Rocket Rookie' Joel Miller, the 2007 Skip Barber Pro Series champion and winner of the sponsorship awarded by the MAZDAZPEED Motorsports Driver Development Ladder to compete in the 2008 Star Mazda Championship.

He went on to confirm his talent with a win -- and a seven-second margin of victory -- in his first-ever Star Mazda race, the season-opener at Sebring in March. Confirming that his performance was no fluke, Miller, the 21 year-old from Hesperia, California, was also comfortably fastest among the top teams and drivers testing at Miller Motorsports Park early last week in his #20 JDC Motorsports/MAZDASPEED/K&N Air Filters Mazda.

"We are running the 'perimeter course' this year, which is a very fast and physical layout with lots of long, fast, high g-force corners that you take in 3rd or 4th gear; I'll be hitting the gym hard this week to get ready for the race," says Miller. "The other big factor for me was that my teammate, Ernesto Otero, is really coming to grips with the car and our driving styles are similar, so we're able to work off each other really well. Most of the 27 cars that tested here last week were all within about two seconds of each other, with the top eight all within one second, so even though we wound up fastest, the talent pool is really deep and it looks like a major battle is shaping up for the 2008 season."

Other drivers who showed well include Andersen Racing driver Charles Hall who was second at both the Sebring season-opener and the recent Miller test in the #77 Pardoes Solicitors/Allied Mazda. The 3rd-place finisher at Sebring, impressive Irishman Peter Dempsey who finished 3rd at Sebring running on an extremely tight budget, was also at the sharp end of the testing time sheet with just a few laps on the second day of testing in his #21 Andersen Racing/Allied Mazda.

Other drivers to watch include Alex Ardoin, the Louisiana native who won the 2007 Star Mazda season-ender at Mazda Raceway Laguna Seca and finished 4th at Sebring in the #51 Mundill/Oral & Facial Surgery Center/Twister Trailer Mazda as well as Tom Gladdis, who finished 5th at Sebring in the #5 Andersen Racing/Law Firm of Marrache & Co./Allied Mazda.

Serving notice that they have stepped up their game with standout performances during the Miller test were Billy Goshen in the #82 Goshen Motorsports/Merv Griffin Entertainment/Global Tracking Mazda, as well as Kristy Kester, half of the brother/sister Kester Racing team, who scored an impressive 8th-place finish at Sebring in the #48 Kester Racing/Texas World Speedway/Unifirst Mazda. Also in the hunt will be Brazilian racers Ciao Lara in the #19 Mundill Racing Mazda and Ernesto Otero in the #18 JDC Motorsports/Brazilian Green Beef Mazda.

Changes to the lineup for Miller include 17 year-old John Edwards, the former Red Bull junior team driver who drove with Forsythe Racing in the Atlantic Championship powered by Mazda in 2007. He has signed with AIM Autosport to drive the #7 AIM Autosport Mazda beginning this weekend.

"I am really happy to be back on track this season" said Edwards. "We spent the off-season searching for opportunities to compete in 2008. Not easy with all the changes in open-wheel racing in North America. Then came a chance to run with AIM in the Star Mazda series. AIM Autosport has a reputation for success in open-wheel racing and they have been strong in the Star Mazda series the last few years." He continued, "This is a great opportunity for me to be with a top team with a seasoned crew in a competitive series. We are confident of our chances."

And Juliana Gonzalez, one of the Star Mazda Championship's most promising female drivers, will be replaced in the #11 Andersen Racing/Allied Mazda this weekend by Jonny Baker, who drove full-time for Andersen's Star Mazda team in 2007.

For the younger drivers on their way up the Motorsports ladder, the Star Mazda Championship – now in its 18th year as one of the most prolific and successful open-wheel driver development series in auto racing today -- is the college basketball, the triple-A baseball, the Junior A hockey of auto racing, a high-speed training ground for future stars of the sport, such as the most recent American Formula One driver Scott Speed, Indy Car stars Marco Andretti and Graham Rahal and prototype phenom Colin Braun as well as the newest addition to Michael Waltrip's NASCAR Sprint Cup team, Michael McDowell, who won the 2005 Star Mazda Championship.

For more mature drivers in whom the competitive fire still burns brightly, the Star Mazda Championship provides a high-profile stage in the form of the Expert (drivers 30 to 44 years old) and Master Series (drivers 45 and older). Expert and Master drivers compete for points and prize money right along with the young hotshoes, but are also competing among themselves for a place on the podium with the top-3 finishers as well as their own year-end championship.

Included in this group is the unique father/son team of Dan Tomlin Jr. (#58 Team Tomlin Mazda) and Dan Tomlin III (#56 Team Tomlin Mazda). Tomlin III races in the Expert Series for drivers aged 30 to 44 (and was the Expert Series champion in 2007) while his father runs in the Master Series for drivers 45 and older. Other notable returning Master Series drivers include Gerry Kraut, a co-owner of JDC Motorsports (#55 Dougherty & Co. and Dougherty Funding LLC Mazda) and his new teammate, Chuck Hulse (#12 JDC Motorsports/Silicon Salvage Mazda). A new, fast face setting impressive times in the Expert Series is Chris Cumming of Vancouver, B.C. in the #16 World Speed Motorsports Mazda.

All of the drivers will have an unusually level playing field in the early part of the 12-race season due to technical changes that took place during the off-season. The basic format remains the same – all drivers compete in identical high-tech open-wheel cars with a carbon fiber chassis, fully-adjustable ‘pushrod’ suspension, and 6-speed sequential gearbox. Power is provided by Mazda’s legendary ‘Renesis’ rotary engine that produces 240 horsepower, top speeds of over 160 mph and 0 to 60 mph acceleration of 2.8 seconds.

But new for 2008 are standing starts (like Formula One races) and an all-new Goodyear radial racing tire designed specifically for the Star Mazda Championship cars. This last factor will be the greatest ‘equalizer’ as the new tires completely change the ‘setup’ (spring rates, shock absorber settings, etc.) of the car from what has been used in previous years. Teams and drivers had their first experience with the new tire at Sebring, and those best able to adapt and find the right setup quickly will have a major advantage in the early races of the season.

Round Two of the 2008 Star Mazda Championship presented by Goodyear will take place at Miller Motorsports Park May 15 – 17. The inaugural event in 2006 was won from the pole by Adrian Carrio, who took the checkered flag 4.153 seconds ahead of second place finisher Ron White... and went on to win the championship with just two wins to White’s three victories. In 2007, Lorenzo Mandarino scored one of his two victories at Miller, on his way to 8th in the championship.

In 2008, competition will take place on the 3.048-mile ‘outer course,’ beginning with a promoter test day on Thursday, May 15. Qualifying is scheduled to take place 9:25 – 10:10 am Saturday, May 17, with the 45-minute Round Two of the 2008 Star Mazda Championship taking the green flag at 4:15 pm that afternoon. The race will be broadcast on SPEED Saturday, May 31 at 3:00 pm Eastern.

For more information on the Star Mazda Championship and its drivers, as well as the Mazda Motorsports ladder system, please visit www.starmazda.com and www.mazdausa.com.

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:

www.champcaratlantic.com

www.starmazda.com

www.skipbarber.com

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