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-- A FAST FIGHT ON A FERTILE BATTLEGROUND --

The last time Star Mazda raced at Infineon, in 2005, the field included four drivers who moved up to race in IndyCar -- and the current crop of young hotshoes is battling to do the same

Infineon Raceway, Sonoma, CA / August 23, 2011 -- The last time the teams and drivers of the Star Mazda Championship presented by Goodyear raced at the 2.52-mile, 12-turn Infineon Raceway road course was in 2005 – and the grid for that long-ago double-header weekend included Marco Andretti, Graham Rahal, Raphael Matos (the driver who eventually went on to win the championship) and James Hinchcliffe, the winner in Sunday's Race 2, his first-ever Star Mazda win. All are now racing in IndyCar.

And at this weekend's Indy Grand Prix of Sonoma, Round 9 of the 11-race season, Star Mazda



Championship drivers from eight different countries will battle to continue that that progression. There are four race winners in the field this weekend, including championship points leader Tristan Vautier (two wins in the #5 JDC Motorsports / Cecibon / Circuit du Laquais Mazda), Connor De Phillippi (three wins / 2nd in the championship driving the #11 Team Pelfrey / Justice Brothers Products / Trademark Garage Floors Mazda), J.V. Horto (one win / 4th in championship driving the #7 Juncos

Racing / Programa Leilões Mazda) and Sage Karam (two wins / 5th in championship driving the #88 Andretti Autosport / MAZDASPEED / Comfort Revolution Mazda).

In the Expert Series, a race-within-a-race for drivers 30 and older, points leader J.W. Roberts has four in-class victories racing the #65 Team GDT / General Data Tech Mazda, Walt Bowlin has one in his #23 AIM Autosport / Tampa Bay Jaw Surgery Mazda and Larry Pegram has two in the #72 AIM Autosport / Tampa Bay Jaw Surgery / Foremost Insurance Mazda.

And, in an interesting twist, one of the drivers in this weekend's race, Irish-born racer Patrick O'Neill (now a San Francisco resident) was not only part of the field back in 2005, but also set the 5th quickest time in the Star Mazda series test held at Infineon on August 17 driving the #64 O'Neill Racing / JDC Motorsports / O'Neill Construction Mazda. O'Neill, who has been competing in the Star Mazda Championship since 2004, and won the National Pro FM championship (driving his Star Mazda race car) in 2010.

Looking to the series test for guidance on who to keep an eye out for this weekend, the first driver to accelerate into view is Sage Karam, who turned the quickest lap of the test (1:29.381) in the #88 Andretti



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Autosport / MAZDASPEED / Comfort Revolution Mazda. Karam, a native of the Andretti home town of Nazareth, PA, has scored two wins so far this season and is 5th in the championship points. He won the 2010 USF2000 National Championship and is racing in Star Mazda this season with scholarship funding from the Mazda Road to Indy driver development program.

Andretti Autosport is the only team running efforts at each level of the Mazda Road to Indy, USF2000, Star Mazda and Indy Lights. For Infineon and the season finale at Mazda Raceway Laguna Seca, Karam, who has been a one-driver show so far this season, will be joined by Zach Veach, a top competitor in the USF2000 National Championship. Veach, from Stockdale, OH, has secured three USF2000 pole positions and one race win, along with eight top-10 finishes, putting him in third place in championship points. He will be competing in Star Mazda full-time in 2012. This weekend he will be driving the #77 Andretti Autosport / Team Zakosi Data Backup / Retail Pro / ArtRotondo.com / ADS IT Solutions Mazda.



Next on the list is current championship points leader Tristan Vautier of Grenoble, France, driver of the #5 JDC Motorsports / Cecibon / Circuit du Laquais Mazda. Vautier has also won two races this season, scored four podiums and finished every race in the top-5 driving for a team that has won the Star Mazda series championship several times, including 2007 with Dane Cameron and 2009 with Adam Christodoulou. Turning the 3rd-quick time during the test was Brazilian racer João Victor Horta, a second-season Star Mazda driver who scored his first-ever series victory in Round 6 at Mosport racing the #7 Juncos Racing / Programa Leilões Mazda. He is currently 4th in the championship battle and driving for the team that shattered every record on the way to winning the series championship last year with Conor Daly.

Another top contender, and the only three-race winner so far in the 2011 season, is Connor De Phillippi of San Clemente, CA. De Phillippi, who is currently second in the points championship, drives the #11 Team Pelfrey / Justice Brothers Products / Trademark Garage Floors Mazda. Like Karam, he came up through the ranks of the Mazda Road to Indy driver development program; he won the 2009 Skip Barber Pro Series and used his scholarship to move up and race in the Star Mazda Championship in 2010.

Attention must also be paid to De Phillippi's Team Pelfrey teammate, Nick Andries. Though he set the 6th-fast time in the test, he is 3rd in the championship with five podium finishes driving the #81 Team Pelfrey / Lithionics Battery / GS610 Brake Fluid / Trademark Garage Floors Mazda. He has not won a race yet, but it's only a matter of time... and this weekend could well be that time.



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Both De Phillippi and Andries drive for one of the most unique teams in the series, Team Pelfrey, an IndyCar team from 1998-2001 noted for giving young drivers their 'big break.' Team owner Dale Pelfrey sold his aerospace business and has revived the team as a 2-car Star Mazda effort... with an eye on graduating to Indy Lights and then IndyCar in the next couple of years.

The Expert Series will also be well-populated this weekend; in addition to Patrick O'Neill mentioned earlier, another Expert Series racer of note participating in the test is Larry Pegram, both a regular Star Mazda competitor and a top rider in the AMA Superbike championship. He has already raced at Infineon this season, finishing 9th in the West Coast Moto Jam AMA Superbike race on May 15 and this weekend will be racing the #72 AIM Autosport / Tampa Bay Jaw Surgery / Foremost Insurance Mazda. Joining him on the AIM team will be St. Petersburg, FL dentist Walt Bowlin in the #23 AIM Autosport / Tampa Bay Jaw Surgery Mazda.

The main competition for Expert Series drivers will come from Texan J.W. Roberts, who is both driver for and owner of Team GDT. Roberts won the 2010 Star Mazda Expert Series and is leading the Expert Series points championship again this year driving the #65 Team GDT / General Data Tech Mazda.



While the first half of the 10-weekend, 11-race 2011 Star Mazda Championship season took place over the course of six months, starting with the season-opener at IndyCar's Grand Prix of St. Petersburg in March and hitting the half-way point with a double-header at the GP3R in Trois-Rivieres, Quebec in August, the remaining half of the season is on a highly-compressed schedule. The Indy Grand Prix of Sonoma is Round 9; Round 10 will be at IndyCar's Baltimore Grand Prix on September 4, with the season finale taking place at Mazda Raceway Laguna Seca on September 18 with the American Le Mans series.

The Star Mazda Championship is unique in that, unlike IndyCar and Indy Lights, it uses a Formula One-style 'standing start.' Drivers line up on the grid two abreast in qualifying order and wait for the red LED panels on the pit wall to turn green... and once they do, it's a flat-out, tire-smoking drag race into the first turn. The 1-hour race, Round 9 of the 2011 Star Mazda Championship presented by Goodyear season, is scheduled to take the green light at 5:00 pm Saturday, August 27.



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For more information on the Star Mazda Championship and its drivers, as well as the Mazda Road to Indy, please visit www.starmazda.com and www.mazdausa.com. For information, interviews and photos, contact Star Mazda Communications Director Peter Frey at (818) 398-5733 or StarMazdaPR@aol.com.

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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:

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