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## STAR MAZDA'S 22nd SEASON OF DEVELOPING TOMORROW'S INDYCAR RACING STARS STARTS THIS WEEKEND IN THE STREETS OF ST. PETE

March 21, 2012 / St. Petersburg, FL -- Open-wheel racing has been hard on the throttle since its last visit



to the streets of St. Petersburg, and nowhere is that acceleration more evident than the growth enjoyed by the Star Mazda Championship presented by Goodyear, the college varsity of open-wheel racing and a major part of the Mazda Road to Indy. Included are a schedule with more races, new national and international TV package, in-car cameras in all cars, new sponsors, new

teams, new driver development programs and a field of 2-+ cars piloted by the hottest young drivers from three continents and eight different countries.

The 2012 Star Mazda Championship schedule includes 17 races on 10 weekends, most of them with IndyCar and many of them – including the Grand Prix of St. Petersburg, will be double-headers with standard qualifying for Race 1, but the starting order for Race 2 being set by each driver's fastest lap in Race 1. All of the races will be broadcast, on the Discovery Channel's Velocity TV in the U.S. and on ESPN International globally.

The U.S. format will be a 1-hour show called the Mazda Motorsports Hour, airing weekly beginning in April, that features highlights from Star Mazda, USF2000 and Playboy MX-5 Cup races. Internationally, the entirety of one race on a double-header weekend will be shown, with highlights from the other race. To check U.S. and international air dates and times, go to the Star Mazda Television icon on [www.StarMazda.com](http://www.StarMazda.com). And all of the cars in each Star Mazda race will be carrying a pair of Replay XD1080 cameras, one in a forward-facing 'shark fin' on top of the roll hoop, the other placed wherever the team wants. Footage will be used for the TV broadcasts, and for driver training.

A substantial field of cars is set to line up on the grid for a pair of the thrilling Star Mazda F1-style 'standing starts,' including one driven by the winner of this race last year, Californian Connor De Phillippi (#2 Juncos Racing / ModSpace Racing / One24), back to fight for the big prize and this year driving for the powerhouse Juncos Racing team that won the championship in 2010. It should also be noted that one of his teammates this season is Martin Scuncio (#22 Juncos Racing Mazda), a South American karting champion who has raced open-wheel cars in Europe, who won the pole last year while De Phillippi started 3rd.



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Like all the drivers in the field, De Phillippi will be battling for the champion's share of a Star Mazda prize fund valued at \$1.2 million, including cash awards and scholarship funding totaling approximately \$660,000 from the Mazda Road to Indy to help the champion move up and compete in the 2013 Indy Lights series. Last year's Star Mazda champion, Tristan Vautier (who finished 3rd in this race), will also be competing this weekend, driving the #77 Sam Schmidt Motorsports Indy Lights car, sponsored by the Mazda Road to Indy. And just to take it the final step, the 2011 Indy Lights champions, Josef Newgarden, will be making his first IndyCar start this weekend as driver of the #67 car for Sara Fisher Hartman Racing. Other Star Mazda graduates who will be lining up on the IndyCar grid this weekend include Graham Rahal, Marco Andretti and 2011 IndyCar Rookie of the Year James Hinchcliffe, taking Danica Patrick's seat in the GoDaddy.com car at Andretti Autosport.

The high-profile 'newbie' in the Star Mazda field this season is Finnish racer Petri Suvanto, the 2011 USF2000 champion now driving the #81 Team Pelfrey Mazda with scholarship funding from the Mazda Road to Indy. While racing, the 19 year-old is also completing his mandatory National Service in his native Finland. Suvanto enjoyed an impressive career in karting, beginning at age 5. He claimed race wins and championships at every level, competing throughout Europe, and made the transition to cars in 2010 after winning a scholarship to contest the Formula BMW Europe Championship.



Another driver development program is making its presence felt on the Star Mazda grid in the form of female racer Ashley Freiberg (#91 JDC Motorsports / TrueCar Mazda) driving for 2011 Star Mazda champions JDC Motorsports. Freiberg is a champion kart racer, graduate of the Lyn St. James Driver Development Academy and history making-winner of 25 races in a row competing in the high school varsity of open-wheel racing, the Skip Barber series and one of six female racers being sponsored by the TrueCar 'Women Empowered Initiative,' a multi-year program supporting rising female racers in several series.

Yet another driver development program takes the form of Juncos Racing teammates Bruno Palli (#15 Juncos Racing / Team Viso Venezuela) and Diego Ferreira (#57 Juncos Racing / Team Viso Venezuela) representing "Team Viso Venezuela," an initiative founded by the duo's Venezuelan manager and IZOD IndyCar Series driver E.J. Viso. The program promotes bringing top young Venezuelan racers to compete in the Mazda Road to Indy with the help of Venezuelan supporters. Both drivers have won national championships in their native Venezuela.

This is precisely the sort of progression upward of stellar young talent that will produce a new golden age of IndyCar racing – and the talent pool for the 2012 Star Mazda Championship is both deep and diverse, including male and female racers ranging in age from 16 to 50-something, and representing



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three continents and eight countries, including the U.S., Canada, Mexico, England, Finland, Brazil, Colombia, Venezuela and Argentina.

While it is a well-tested truth that "Anything can happen in car racing... particularly on a street circuit" a two-day Star Mazda Championship series test, held earlier this week at Barber Motorsports Park in Birmingham, Alabama, did serve to establish a preliminary 'driver to watch' list. Not surprisingly, Connor De Phillippi, the most experienced driver in the field, set the pace on Day 1, unofficially smashing the Star Mazda track record at Barber on lap 20 of the first session. Setting the pace in the second session was Petri Suvanto, making him the quickest rookie of the day, while session three was topped by Sage Karam (#88 Andretti Autosport / Comfort Revolution Mazda), the 2010 USF2000 who moved up to Star Mazda in 2011 with scholarship funding from the Mazda Road to Indy and went on to win two races, win Star Mazda Rookie of the Year and finish 5th in the championship.



"We are way ahead of where we were last year at this time. We were a new Star Mazda team, with a first year Star Mazda driver, and I was the only (Star Mazda) driver," says Karam. "We accomplished a lot and made progress each weekend for some wins, poles and the Rookie of the Year award. This year the Andretti Autosport Comfort Revolution No. 88 team has a year under our belts and a teammate in Zach (Veach). I couldn't have been happier with the testing and the progress of the car. I am in the hottest seat in racing and I really want to start capitalizing on that right from the start!"

By the first session of Day 2, the top-5 cars were all under the official lap record, including De Phillippi, Suvanto, English newcomer and European Formula Renault veteran Jack Hawksworth (#82 Team Pelfrey / TORGOEN Swiss Watches / EXA Networks Mazda), the aforementioned Martin Scuncio and Gabriel 'Gabby' Chaves (#19 JDC Motorsports / OMP Mazda), now racing for JDC Motorsports in Star Mazda on the Road to Indy after several years in Europe running F3 and GP3.

Other top contenders in the field this weekend include international karting champion Gustavo Menezes, who changed teams in the off season and will race the #83 Team Pelfrey / TrueCar.com Mazda and USF2000 standout Zach Veach (#77 Andretti Autosport / Zakoski Data Backup Mazda) who drove two Star Mazda races last season and finished on the podium in the season finale at Mazda Raceway.

Skip Barber standout Stefan Rzadainki (#99 JDC Motorsports / PoweredByAlberta.com) is moving up in class and is one of three Canadians competing in Star Mazda this season, as is Zack Meyer (#66 AIM Autosport / Partners III), a top karter who has driven in several Star Mazda races during the last three seasons; this will be his first full-season campaign and he's driving for AIM Autosport, a Toronto-based team that won the Star Mazda Championship with American John Edwards in 2008. Representing



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Québec on the grid will be second-year Star Mazda racer Jérémy Daniel (#10 The Racing Company / FixAuto Mazda) who scored six top-10s and finished 10th in the championship last year driving for his family-owned team.

Looking South for rising stars, Juan Piedrahita (#9 JDC Motorsports / Petrosur / GFK Motors Mazda), a Colombian-born driver now living in Mexico City, ran several Star Mazda races in 2010 but decided he needed more experience and went back to USF2000 in 2011 before returning for a full-season campaign this season. Venezuelan racer Camilo Schmidt (#21 Linares Racing Mazda) turns family-owned Linares racing, now in its third season of competition, into a two-car team for the first time. He joins fellow Venezuelan Carlos Linares (#20 Linares Racing / Mindeportes Mazda) who scored eight top-10 finishes last year and was 7th in the championship. Colombian racer Andrés Méndez (#53 Team GDT / GroupKriterion.com / DataFile.com Mazda) joins Team GDT, which is muscling up to fight for the overall championship with the addition of American Ryan Tveter (#33 Team GDT Mazda).

Team GDT owner/driver J.W. Roberts (#65 Team GDT Mazda / General Data Tech), a two-time Star Mazda Expert Series champion, will head the over-30 contingent on the Star Mazda grid this season. The Expert Series is a race-within-a-race and a championship-within-a-championship that sees businessmen racers (company CEOs, bankers, entrepreneurs, etc.) battling wheel-to-wheel at 150 mph with the hottest young drivers from around the world. Other drivers in this class include St. Pete's 'Racing Dentist' Walt Bowlin (#23 AIM Autosport / Tampa Bay Jaw Surgery Mazda); Larry Pegram, top AMA SuperBike racer and driver of the #72 AIM Autosport / Tampa Bay Jaw Surgery / Foremost Insurance Mazda; and Dom Bastien, a CEO from West Palm Beach now in his third year of Star Mazda Competition.



Very nearly as interesting as the drivers themselves is what they are competing for; a prize fund valued at \$1.2 million. The Mazda Road to Indy, in addition to providing education, contacts and access to the upper levels of IndyCar racing, also offers a specific and highly desirable set of prizes: The Mazda Road to Indy awards scholarship funding to the champions in each four open-wheel series: The USF2000 National Championship Powered by Mazda gets a scholarship worth approximately \$350,000 to move up to the Star Mazda Championship presented by Goodyear. The Star Mazda champion gets a scholarship worth approximately \$660,000 to compete in the Firestone Indy Lights Series. And the Indy Lights champion gets a scholarship worth about \$1 million to compete in the IZOD IndyCar series and the Indy 500.



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It should also be noted that the MAZDASPEED Motorsports Driver Development Ladder, the program that originally provided the model for the Mazda Road to Indy, is still active and provides similar help, both career training and financial, helping karting champions to move up to Skip Barber, and Skip Barber champions to move up to USF2000.

Rest assured that the drivers in the 2012 Star Mazda Championship presented by Goodyear are well aware of the opportunity that confronts them, and expect to see wheel-to-wheel, give-no-quarter racing right from the first turn of the first lap of the first race.

All those firsts will take place this weekend at the Grand Prix of St. Petersburg, starting with a Star Mazda practice session from 6:10--6:40 pm Thursday, March 22. A morning practice session on Friday, March 23 will be followed by qualifying for Race 1, which will take place 4:50--5:10 pm. The 30-minute Race 1 is scheduled to take the green light for the series' traditional – and always exciting – F1-style standing start at 1:00 pm Saturday, March 4. With the fastest lap for each car in Race 1 setting the starting grid for Race2, the second Star Mazda battle of the weekend begins at 10:05am Sunday, March 25.

Round 2 of the 10-weekend, 17-race 2012 Star Mazda Championship season takes place next weekend, March 31 – April 1 during the Indy Grand Prix of Alabama at Barber Motorsports Park. Star Mazda races will be broadcast on Velocity TV and ESPN International; for air dates and times, go to [www.StarMazda.com](http://www.StarMazda.com) and click the Star Mazda TV icon.

Fans can follow the drivers through the course of the weekend via the series' web site at [www.StarMazda.com](http://www.StarMazda.com), or on Facebook at <http://www.facebook.com/starmazdaseries> and Twitter at <http://www.twitter.com/starmazdaseries>. Follow the actual race on your computer or smartphone at <http://livetiming.net/starmazda/>.

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For more information on the Star Mazda Championship and its drivers, as well as the Mazda Motorsports ladder system, please visit [www.starmazda.com](http://www.starmazda.com) and [www.mazdausa.com](http://www.mazdausa.com). For information, interviews and photos, please contact Star Mazda Communications Director Peter Frey at (818) 398-5733 or [StarMazdaPR@aol.com](mailto:StarMazdaPR@aol.com).



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