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A WELL ROUNDED EDUCATION -- STAR MAZDA DRIVERS ENTER A NEW PHASE OF THEIR ON-TRACK TRAINING WITH THE FIRST OF TWO OVALS IN A ROW THIS WEEKEND AT THE NIGHT BEFORE THE 500

Lucas Oil Raceway / Indianapolis / May 21 – Drivers in the Star Mazda Championship presented by Goodyear – a major part of the official IndyCar driver development series, the Mazda Road to Indy – benefit from a comprehensive education both on and off-track. At the first two events of the 2012 season,

they experienced both the street circuit at the Grand Prix of St. Petersburg and the natural-terrain road course in the Grand Prix of Alabama at Barber Motorsports Park.

Additionally, at St. Pete, drivers went through Part 1 one of the Indy Summit, a series of classroom presentations designed to educate them in the modern realities of sponsorship, branding and marketing. Classes included a 'Business of Racing

101' seminar presented by top officials from Mazda Motorsports, media training, and a social marketing presentation by Star Mazda graduate James Hinchcliffe (the 2011 IndyCar 'Rookie of the Year' and front-row qualifier for the 2012 Indy 500).

Now the Star Mazda drivers, top young male and female racers representing eight countries and three continents, enter the newest phase of their education – additional off-track training, seminars and meetings with top IndyCar officials and team owners at the Indianapolis Motor Speedway... and the first of two ovals on the 2012 schedule.

For some, this will be a return to familiar ground; the winner of last year's Star Mazda race at the Night Before the 500, Connor De Phillippi, is again in the field, chasing the big prize – scholarship funding from the Mazda Road to Indy to move up and compete in the 2013 Indy Lights series. Also in the field, after having turned the quickest times in pre-race testing at Lucas Oil Raceway, Finnish racer/soldier Petri Suvanto, who won both the USF2000 race at the Night Before the 500 last year, and the championship, which means he is racing in Star Mazda this season with scholarship funding from the Mazda Road to Indy.

In addition to two former winners at this track, there are nine "Night Before the 500" veterans in this year's Star Mazda starting field; six of them (De Phillippi, Sage Karam, Martin Scuncio, Gustavo Menezes and Carlos Linares) ran Star Mazda last year and three of them ran USF2000 (Suvanto, Zach Veach and



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Juan Piedrahita), but have moved up this year. Karam, a top veteran contender, won two of the three ovals on the schedule last year, finished 3rd here last year and won the 2011 Star Mazda 'Rookie of the Year' award.

Utilizing the times set during the official Star Mazda pre-race test at Lucas Oil Raceway on May 5, we come up with a reasonable feel for how things might go on Saturday night when the field gets the green flat... of course, things hardly every go how you expect, particularly with a group of fearless young drivers this talented battling wheel-to-wheel on an oval.

Finnish rookie Petri Suvanto – who won here in USF2000 last year -- set the quick time in both the 3-hour morning session and the 2-hour session later in the day, in the heat of the afternoon. Suvanto, 19, from Nurmo, Finland, turned the fastest lap of the test on Lap 56 of the morning session, 20.236 (122.040 mph), driving the same #81 Team Pelfrey / Mazda Road to Indy Mazda he used to score a podium finish in Round 2 at the Grand Prix of St. Petersburg. Suvanto is the reigning USF2000 champion and is racing in the Star Mazda Championship this year with scholarship funding from the Mazda Road to Indy. He has scored one podium finish so far in 2012, and three top-5s, placing him 6th in the championship.



"I had one of the best races of my career here last year, so I feel I know the track like the inside of my pocket," says Suvanto, who is currently serving his obligatory two year enlistment in the Finnish military. "The Star Mazda car is different, more powerful and faster, but if the team gives you a good car and you drive very smoothly, it is not so difficult to adjust. My season so far has not gone quite as I hoped; the competition here is very strong and even a small mistake costs you many places, so I'm still learning, and in the next two races, both ovals, it is critical to drive perfectly... and that is my goal."

In the final two-hour afternoon session, saving the best last, he posted a lap of 20.348 as the clock expired on the final session. His final flyer earned him top-of-the-time-sheet honors over Sage Karam, who had led most of the second session with a fast time of 20.393 in his #88 Andretti Autosport / Comfort Revolution Mazda. Karam, the 2011 Star Mazda Rookie of the Year, won two of the three ovals on last year's schedule. Karam was the 2010 USF2000 champion and raced in Star Mazda last year with Mazda Road to Indy scholarship funding; he finished 3rd at the 2011 Night Before the 500.



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Karam's performance very nearly put conventional wisdom back in charge, until you consider that it was English rookie Jack Hawksworth, who set the overall 2nd-fast time of 20.299 (121.616 mph) on Lap 73 of the morning session. Hawksworth, a two-time race winner so far this season and currently leading the championship driving the #82 Team Pelfrey / TORGOEN Swiss Watches / EXA Networks Mazda, is new to oval racing. He slipped to 4th in the final session, but only by 0.173-sec. – but it should be noted that, in both sessions, the top dozen cars were all within one second of each other.... a reliable indicator that the Night Before the 500 will feature some intense, wheel-to-wheel action.

And what of the most experienced driver in the series, and winner of last year's Night Before the 500 (as well as this year's Round 1 at St. Petersburg), Connor De Phillippi? He was 6th fast in the morning session with a lap of 20.581 (119.994 mph) in the #2 Juncos Racing / ModSpace Racing / One24 Mazda, and followed that up with a 5th-fast run in the afternoon, 20.601 (119.878 mph).

“Today was a productive day of testing with the team,” said De Phillippi, who set the Star Mazda track record of 19.999 at Lucas Oil Raceway in 2011. “We are still working on improving many areas of the car to put it up front for the race this month. A big thank you to Juncos Racing and ModSpace Motorsports for getting me on track. Now we are onwards and upwards for the Night Before the 500.”

Other interesting results: Italian F3 and GP3 veteran Gabby Chaves was 3rd-quick in the morning with a lap of 20.446 (120.786 mph) in his #19 JDC Motorsports / OMP Mazda, but slipped to 10th in the afternoon. Gustavo Menzes, who finished 7th in the race last year, was 5th-fast in the morning with a 20.524 (120.327 mph) in the #83 Team Pelfrey / TrueCar.com Mazda; he fell to 8th in the afternoon. Zach Veach, on the other hand, was 7th-fast in the morning, but improved to 3rd-fast in the afternoon with a 20.483 (120.568 mph) in his #77 Andretti Autosport / Zakoski Data Backup Mazda.

Sixteen Star Mazda drivers and cars participated in the test, as well as the Mazda Road to Indy activities that took place the day before, Friday, May 4, at the Indianapolis Motor Speedway. There more than 50 drivers from Star Mazda, Indy Lights and USF2000 attended the second annual Mazda Road to Indy Oval Clinic. Hosted by INDYCAR’s Director of Grassroots Initiatives Jason Penix and led by multiple driving champion and USF2000 driving coach Gerardo Bonilla, the clinic covers all aspects of oval racing with the intricacies supported by video footage. A panel of experts shared their oval racing knowledge, including INDYCAR President of Competition Beau Barfield (right), IZOD IndyCar Series driver and team owner Ed Carpenter, former Indianapolis 500 Rookie of the





Year and Elite Engines owner Steve Knapp, Rahal Letterman Lanigan Racing team owner and former Indy 500 winner Bobby Rahal (left), and former driver, INDYCAR race steward Johnny Unser.

Summit activities surrounding the Indianapolis 500 include an autograph session on Community Day, a shop tour of Andretti Autosport hosted by Michael Andretti, track laps at the famed Brickyard, a driver fitness and wellness course by PitFit Training, a meet-and-greet with IZOD IndyCar Series and Firestone Indy Lights team owners as well as the opportunity for the winners of the "Night Before the 500" in USF2000 and Star Mazda and Firestone Freedom 100 races to be interviewed on the Victory podium minutes before the start of the Greatest Spectacle in Racing.

Round 6 of the 2012 Star Mazda Championship presented by Goodyear, the Night Before the 500 at Lucas Oil Raceway, begins with a three hour test session from 6-9 pm, Friday May 25. Practice continues on Saturday, May 26 with sessions from 12:05-12:35 pm and 1:20-1:50 pm. Single-car qualifying will take place from 4:55-5:40 pm, with the 45-minute/100-lap race scheduled to take the green flag at 8:25 pm.

Star Mazda Championship cars all carry two Replay XD1080 cameras to provide exciting driver POV footage for races that are broadcast tape-delayed on Discovery's Velocity Channel; click [here](#) to search for broadcast dates, times and channel in your area.



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. For information, interviews and photos, please contact Star Mazda Communications Director Peter Frey at (818) 398-5733 or StarMazdaPR@aol.com.

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