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Karam Tops Time Charts on Friday As USF2000 Set Prepares for Doubleheader This Weekend at St. Pete Grand Prix

ST. PETERSBURG, Fla., March 26 — Sage Karam isn't old enough to legally drive a passenger car on the street yet, but the 15-year-old from Nazareth, Pa. topped the USF2000 time charts Friday on the streets of St. Petersburg, Fla.

Karam was driving a Mazda, but no St. Petersburg police officers tore after him as he zipped around the 1.8-mile, 14-turn course set up on the streets of their city, running about 125 miles per hour down the straightaways. That's because Karam was driving a Mazda-powered Van Diemen race car and he was practicing for this weekend's doubleheader for the USF2000 National Championship presented by Cooper Tires and powered by Mazda. Those races, set for Saturday at 12:20 p.m. and Sunday at 8 a.m., are part of the Honda Grand Prix of St. Petersburg.

Driving the Andretti Autosport No. 8, Karam was the fastest driver in both the morning and the afternoon practice sessions. His fastest time of the day came in the afternoon when his 11th of 12 laps was timed in 1:14.675 for an average

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speed of 86.776 miles per hour. Karam's red No. 8 is sponsored by the Michael Fux Foundation, Comfort Revolution, Bell Helmets, Alpine Stars, Walters Web and artrotundo.com.

One other driver broke into the 1:14s. That was 18-year-old Raphael Abbate of JDC Motorsports, who was sixth-fastest in the morning practice but cut almost 3 seconds off his time in the afternoon to end up second in that session and second for the day with a time of 1:14.812 and an average speed of 86.617 mph. Abbate, of Sao Paulo, Brazil, also set his fastest lap on his 11th of 12 trips around the course in the afternoon. His No. 11 is sponsored by Avery Dennison and Alphacolor. Abbate's fastest lap of the day was only 0.137 of a second slower than Karam's.

Benjamin Searcy of Tuscaloosa, Ala. was third in both sessions but it was his afternoon time that gave him the third-fastest time of the day. Driving the Combustion Technologies car fielded by Z Sports Midwest, his fastest lap took just 1:15.245, which was very similar to Karam's fastest lap in the morning session, a 1:15.237.

Patrick McKenna of Dublin, Ireland had the fourth-fastest time of the day with his 1:15.315 recorded in the afternoon session. His car is prepared by Cape Motorsports with Wayne Taylor Racing. It is sponsored by Motorsport Ireland, Willsborough Transport and the Irish Sports Council.

Rounding out the top five in the 13-car field was Martin Sala of Bogota, Columbia. He ran a 1:15.769 in the morning for second in that session, just 0.532 of a second off Karam's morning time, but Sala lowered that to a 1:15.421 in the afternoon session for fifth in those standings and for the day. He drives a car prepared by JDC Motorsports and sponsored by Aero Gal and Lubricantes Gulf.

Five different teams had the top five cars in the morning session. In the afternoon and for the day JDC Motorsports had two of the top five.

The next session will be qualifying, which is slated for 8 a.m. Saturday. It will set the grid for the season opener a few hours later.

Each driver's fastest lap during Saturday's race will determine his starting position in the second half of the doubleheader on Sunday at 8 a.m.

The practice result sheets as well as live timing and scoring can be found on the Internet at usf2000.com.

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Twelve of the 13 cars are competing in the top class, the Championship class. Pabst Racing Services' J.R. Smart of Fitchburg, Wis. will automatically win the National class since he's the only one entered in that division.

Five cars are using the new Mazda MZR engine that will be required in the Championship class in 2011, according to Steve Knapp of Elite Engines, the series' official engine preparer of those powerplants. They include Karam's Andretti Autosport car, both of the cars fielded by Cape Motorsports with Wayne Taylor Racing (driven by McKenna and Josh Fielding of Chesterfield, England) and two of the three cars entered by JDC Motorsports. Sala and Abbate are using the new engine on the latter team, while their teammate, Mikhail Goikhberg of St. Petersburg, Russia, is driving a car with a Zetec engine.

Knapp also explained an easy way for fans to tell which USF2000 cars have Mazda engines and which ones have Zetec engines. If one is standing directly in front of a car's front wings and facing the driver, the air scoop is on the right in a USF2000 car using a Mazda engine, and on the left in a car using a Zetec engine. (In other words, the air scoop is on the driver's left with a Mazda and the driver's right with a Zetec.)

Knapp himself is a USF2000 graduate, as he won the series' championship in 1996 before finishing third in the 1998 Indy 500 and earning that race's prestigious Rookie of the Year award in his first of three starts at the Brickyard.

The USF2000 series' administrator, Dan Andersen, spoke at two press conferences Friday.

One was held to announce that the Road to Indy is supporting Jeremy Shaw's prestigious Team USA scholarship program (see teamusascholarship.org).

The other was to announce that Andretti Autosport is adding another USF2000 car to its stable. Fifteen-year-old Zach Veach of Stockdale, Ohio will be Sage Karam's teammate starting with the next race. That will be held May 29 on the oval at O'Reilly Raceway Park in Indianapolis.

Away from the track, Veach heads up a teen safe driving campaign and plans to release a book, "99 Things You Wish You Knew Before Getting Your Driver's License," on his 16th birthday, Dec. 9. He also just published an iPhone application to help teens avoid dangerous text messaging while driving. For more information on Veach, see zachveach.com.

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About Mazda:

On any given weekend there are more Mazdas on the road courses of America than any other brand of vehicle. MX-5 Miata, RX-8, MAZDA3, MAZDA6, RX-7 and other vintage Mazda models are all popular race cars because every Mazda has the soul of a sports car. In fact, the largest road-racing class in the world is Spec Miata. With more than 2,500 first- and second-generation Miatas tearing up America's racetracks, it the most-raced production car in the world. Mazda's involvement in motorsports extends to its relationship with one of the world's premier road courses, Mazda Raceway Laguna Seca in Monterey, Calif., and the Skip Barber Schools for driving and racing.

Celebrating its 40th anniversary in the United States in 2010, Mazda North American Operations is headquartered in Irvine, Calif. It oversees the sales, marketing, parts business and customer service of Mazda vehicles in the United States, Canada and Mexico through nearly 900 dealers. Operations in Canada are managed by Mazda Canada, Inc., located in Ontario. Operations in Mexico are managed by Mazda Motor de Mexico in Mexico City.

For more information see MazdaUSA.com.

About Cooper Tire & Rubber Company:

Cooper Tire & Rubber Company is a global company that specializes in the design, manufacture, marketing and sales of passenger car and light truck tires and subsidiaries that specialize in medium truck, motorcycle and racing tires. With headquarters in Findlay, Ohio, Cooper Tire has manufacturing, sales, distribution, technical and design facilities within its family of companies located in 10 countries around the world.

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