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Karam Leads All the Way to Win Round 1 Of USF2000 National Championship Saturday at St. Petersburg

ST. PETERSBURG, Fla., March 27 — Andretti Autosport's Sage Karam of Nazareth, Pa. dominated Saturday's Round 1 of the USF2000 National Championship presented by Cooper Tires and powered by Mazda, leading all 20 laps on the St. Petersburg street circuit to record a 13.970-second victory over Patrick McKenna of Dublin, Ireland, who drives for Cape Motorsports with Wayne Taylor Racing.

Drivers from five different teams were represented in the top five and drivers from nine different countries comprised the top nine as the revitalized series staged its first race. The series, which is part of both the Indy Racing League's Road to Indy program and the MAZDASPEED Motorsports driver development program, will hold the second half of its first doubleheader of the year tomorrow at 8 a.m. as a preliminary race to the IZOD IndyCar Series headliner at the Honda Grand Prix of St. Petersburg.

Terrick Mansur of Aruba took the final podium position for Liberty Motorsports, while Martin Scuncio of Concepcion, Chile finished fourth for Pabst Racing Services. Martin Sala of Bogota, Columbia rounded out the top five for JDC MotorSports.

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The 13-car field consisted of 12 Championship-class cars and one National-class car, with J.R. Smart of Fitchburg, Wis. taking the National class honors for Pabst Racing Services.

Karam's only real scare came in Turn 1 on the first lap when he was almost tagged in the rear by Scuncio, who had started second but was taking evasive action himself as the drivers jockeyed for position. ZSport Midwest's Benjamin Searcy of Tuscaloosa, Ala. ended up suffering the most as he wasn't able to continue, bringing out the first of two full-course cautions from laps two to three.

The restart on lap four went fairly smoothly but then Liberty Motorsports' Matthew Powers of Danville, Calif. brought out the second and final yellow on laps five and six when he flat-spotted a tire and it deflated.

The rest of the 20-lap race went non-stop, with Karam extending his lead throughout. He also set the fastest lap of the race with a 1:13.507, earning his second "Cooper Tires, Don't Give Up a Thing Award" since the pole and the starting grid for tomorrow's race is being established by each driver's fastest race laps from Round 1. Although that was an automatic track record for fastest race lap, it didn't beat his own 1:13.384 automatic track record he set in winning the pole for Round 1 during qualifications Saturday morning. That has to please his car owner, Michael Andretti, as well as the 15-year-old driver's sponsors: The Michael Fux Foundation, Comfort Revolution, Bell Helmets, Alpine Stars, Walters Web and artrotundo.com.

McKenna started third and took second briefly on lap one before he settled into third behind Karam and Sala. He made several attempts to pass Sala and then got the job done in Turn 1 working lap 10, pleasing his sponsors: Motorsport Ireland, Willsborough Transport and the Irish Sports Council.

Mansur, who was running fourth after a great start from his original seventh starting position, came with him, which dropped Sala to fourth and sealed Mansur's podium position for his followers on Aruba.com. It also was a great result for his first race back after a two-year break while he was getting a degree from Full Sail University in Winter Park, Fla. to become a software developer.

Scuncio got around Sala working lap 11. The top five positions remained the same after that until the checkered waved.

Scuncio is sponsored by Fuerza Chile, while Sala's fifth-place car advertises Aero Gal and Lubricantes Gulf.

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Raphael Abbate of Sao Paulo, Brazil came from last to finish sixth. Josh Fielding of Chesterfield, England; Mikhail Goikhberg of St. Petersburg, Russia; Anthony Furfari of Woodbridge, Ontario and Ardie Greenamyre of Louisville, Ky. completed the balance of the top 10. Smart, Powers and Searcy rounded out the provisional finishing order.

Fielding will join Karam in Row 1 for tomorrow morning's race, because he set the second-fastest lap in Round 1. Row 2 tomorrow morning will consist of McKenna and Scuncio. Mansur and Sala will start from Row 3. Abbate and Goikhberg will see what they can do from Row 4. Row 5 will consist of Furfari and Powers. Greenamyre, Smart and Searcy will round out the starting grid for Round 2.

More information and live timing and scoring are available on the Internet at usf2000.com.

Post-race quotes follow:

Sage Karam: "I'm 15, so this is the first time I've driven any kind of car on the street. Being in a street-course race gave me a whole new mindset. Hopefully tomorrow we'll put on a better race for the fans.

"We still have some stuff we want to change on the car, but I'm really thrilled to come away with the win. We're going to try to set the car up for later in the race tomorrow.

"At the start I almost got clipped going into Turn 1. Then there were those two full-course yellows, and I thought, 'Gee!'

"I had one mis-shift too. Once going from third to fourth I went into first. But then I just focused forward for the whole race.

"The USF2000 series, the Road to Indy and being part of the MAZDASPEED Motorsports program is a wonderful opportunity for all of us. I have to thank Andretti Autosport and my sponsors."

Patrick McKenna: "I started third, got second in the first turn on the first lap, but then fell back to third. I tried Sala several times before I got him. I got a good run off the last corner and just went for it.

"This is a fantastic series. You don't get this kind of opportunity in Europe. It's all a lot of work for the Andersens, but driving through the paddock with the Indy cars was great!

"I really like this course too. Turn 2 and Turn 3 are brilliant; they're a really quick section,

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with a lot of speed, and walls on either side of you to make things a bit more crucial.

“The Cooper tires were fine. It didn’t take long to get heat into them, and they were consistent. I have to thank my sponsors too.”

Terrick Mansur: “I saw Patrick trying to pass Martin Sala, and I just followed Patrick through. I just put my nose behind him and stayed with him.

“Liberty Motorsports did a great job; it was fun. We had a tough first session which cost us track time. We’re almost where we want to be, but we have some work to do before tomorrow morning’s race. We’ll go over the data and work as hard as we can and try to be on the podium again tomorrow.

“Our Cooper tires were fine. We had a little trouble but it was because of our set-up, not the tires. The tires were fine.”

J.R. Smart (National class winner): “I don’t mind saying it; I’m 56 and I’ve been racing for over 30 years, and this is the most fun I’ve ever had with my clothes on! I’d welcome more guys to come compete in the National class. The more the merrier! This was great!

“It was a last-minute decision for us to come. Augie Pabst was working on a deal with another driver and that fell through, so I decided to come less than a week ago. I have to thank Michelle Kish for helping me with the paperwork. I also have to thank Augie Pabst and our engine builder, Steve Knapp.

“This is my first time on a street circuit ever, and I loved it. This series is great; this was a whole other level right here.”

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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.

For more information visit Cooper Tire's Web site at coopertire.com.