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Karam Rules Thursday's Race at Road Atlanta And Clinches USF2000 Driver Championship

BRASELTON, Ga., Sept. 30 — Fifteen-year-old Sage Karam of Nazareth, Pa. clinched the driver championship in the Championship class of the "Cooper Tires Presents the USF2000 National Championship Powered by Mazda" Thursday afternoon at Road Atlanta when he led all 19 laps in his Andretti Autosport No. 8 Van Diemen Mazda sponsored by the Michael Fux Foundation, Comfort Revolution, Bell Helmets, Alpine Stars, Walters Web and Artrotondo.com.

To make the day even better for his Indianapolis-based team, his teammate, 15-year-old Zach Veach of Stockdale, Ohio, finished second in a similar Van Diemen Mazda sponsored by ADS, Retail Pro and Secure IT. It was the first one-two finish for the team this year, although it clinched the team title for the top class before it unloaded its transporter at Road Atlanta.

Karam also clinched the VP Fuels Rookie of the Year award.

Thursday morning Karam earned his tenth Cooper Tires "Don't Give Up a Thing" Pole Award of the year with an automatic new track record of 1:26.856 (105.278 miles per hour) on a wet track. He also set the fastest lap of Thursday's race with a 1:22.650 (110.635 mph), which gives him another Cooper Tires pole for the season finale here Friday at 8:45 a.m.

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The 30-minute races are support events for the Petit Le Mans Powered by Mazda2, the season finale of the American Le Mans Series presented by Tequila Patron.

Patrick McKenna of Dublin, Ireland, the only driver who was still in contention for the championship going into the Road Atlanta doubleheader, placed third on Thursday in the Cape Motorsports with Wayne Taylor Racing No. 2. It is sponsored by Willsborough Transport, Motorsport Ireland and the Irish Sports Council. Mikhail Goikhberg of St. Petersburg, Russia could have moved into second in the point standings with an excellent weekend, but with the podium finish McKenna, 23, nailed down the \$10,000 runner-up position for the year.

By winning the championship Karam earns a sponsorship package from Mazda valued at \$350,000 to help him advance to the Star Mazda series next year. In addition to being part of the MAZDASPEED Motorsports driver development program, both of these series are part of the Road to Indy program. At the season opener in March Karam's team owner, Michael Andretti, hinted that he might start a Star Mazda team sometime in the future too. "I don't know anything about it, but we're going to get right on that and talk about that next week," Karam said with the American flag draped around his shoulders as he left victory lane.

Series newcomer Luke Ellery of Melbourne, Australia qualified second in the JDC MotorSports No. 5 and he passed Karam for the lead by charging to the outside in turn one on the first lap. He showed the way until Karam passed him back on the backstretch on the same lap. Ellery fell to seventh by lap two, which made the top three Karam, Veach and McKenna. Ellery eventually retired with only six laps completed, reportedly with an overheating car.

There was one full-course caution on laps three and four so a tow truck could retrieve the Cape Motorsports with Wayne Taylor Racing No. 18 of Javier Barrales of Concepcion, Chile, which became stranded in Turn 10 on lap two.

The green flew again on lap five. Goikhberg passed McKenna to move his JDC MotorSports No. 10 into third place on lap six, but on the very next lap he fell back to sixth.

That allowed McKenna to move back into third place and the podium positions never changed again. Karam had an 8.163-second advantage over Veach at the checkered. Goikhberg watched the end of the race stranded off Turn 2 due to his mechanical difficulties.

Liberty Motorsports' Felix Serralles of Ponce, Puerto Rico, who along with Spencer Pigot were named as the 2010 recipients of the Team U.S.A. scholarships at lunchtime, hounded

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McKenna for third at the end, drawing to just 0.2 of a second off McKenna's rear wing. Serralles crossed the line in fourth place but after the race he received a 20-second penalty for passing J.R. Smart of Fitchburg, Wis. under yellow and he lost one position in the run-down to place fifth. Prior to that he set the second-fastest lap of the race so he'll start beside Karam on Row 1 in Friday morning's race with his No. 14, which is sponsored by SS Discount Tire of Haines City, Fla.

The driver who actually finished fourth on Thursday was Serralles' teammate, Matthew Powers of Danville, Calif. His Liberty Motorsports No. 41 is sponsored by the Ghilotti Brothers.

Finishing sixth was the new National class champion, Ardie Greenamyre of Louisville, Ky., who drives the AcceleRace Motorsports No. 28 sponsored by Bidazzled.com, Sabelt, Sube Sports, ChaseCam, MemeTech and NEXAIRA. Although the USF2000 series' top class is open only to Van Diemens, any car that meets the current SCCA Formula Continental rules is eligible to compete in the series' National class. By winning the National class championship Greenamyre will receive an award valued at \$20,000 consisting of a new, race-ready Mazda MZR 2.0-liter engine and the pieces needed to convert a Zetec Van Diemen to Mazda power. Greenamyre, who started 11th in Thursday's race, also received the \$200 Tilton Hard Charger award because he improved the most positions.

Pabst Racing Services' Smart placed seventh in the race, finished second in the National standings and received the \$200 Staubli award on Thursday for his work in the Smart Motors No. 9. Raphael Abbate of Sao Paulo, Brazil (JDC MotorSports No. 11 sponsored by Avery Dennison and Alphacolor), Goikhberg, Ellery (luke-ellery.com) and Barrales completed the final rundown.

PFC gift certificates of \$100 and \$50 went to the two class winners, Andretti Autosport and AcceleRace Motorsports, respectively.

Despite rain earlier in the day the 2.54-mile, 12-turn road course was basically dry throughout the race, although it still had some wet spots early in the event.

For more information on the USF2000 series, as well as live timing and scoring of Friday morning's race, see USF2000.com.

Mazda plans to offer live video streaming of the awards ceremony on Friday night when the Star Mazda, USF2000 and Skip Barber National champions are honored at the Chateau Elan Inn in Braselton. The Internet address is <http://www.justin.tv/a/mazdausa> and the coverage is slated to begin at 7:30 p.m. Eastern time.

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The podium finishers' post-race quotes follow:

Sage Karam: "I'm so happy and honored to have won the Championship driver title today after winning the first race. We started out the week on a rough note with a little incident on Tuesday, but it really can't get better than this. I want to thank everybody: Michael Andretti, the Michael Fux Foundation, Comfort Revolution, Mazda, Cooper Tires, the Road to Indy program and my awesome crew. I can't thank Andretti Autosport enough for the opportunity to race this season, and I hope I can make them proud again tomorrow morning.

"Winning this championship is a great honor. I really have to thank Michael Fux. We got together when I was 13 when I didn't have enough money to go racing, and he has been a huge help.

"Andretti Autosport gave me an awesome car. It kept improving and improving, and it was really good at the end of the race.

"It's Zach and my first one-two. We said we have to finish one-two just like we do on Xbox. Today we did, and we're thrilled!"

Zach Veach: "I can't thank my team enough; everyone has been working so hard. We've had some of the highest finishes of our season these last few races, which shows how far we've come this year. We've got some things to work on but Andretti Autosport has given me a great opportunity and for that I can't thank them enough. I want to thank my teammate and closest friend, Sage Karam, for all the support this year and congratulate him on winning the championship.

"I also want to thank my family. This is my first podium finish of the year that they were all here to see!"

Patrick McKenna: "It was a pretty quiet race, really. I missed a gear on the restart. But I want to congratulate Sage and Zach. We couldn't do a whole lot with them today. Serfalles was close at the end too.

"We changed a gear level before the race and had trouble with it throughout the race. We'll work on that for tomorrow.

"I want to thank Dominic and Nicholas Cape and everyone else on my team and my sponsors. I want to thank Mazda, Cooper Tires, the Road to Indy and Andersen Promotions for giving us a great series too. I also want to thank my brother Mark, who is here from Ireland to watch me race. I want to thank Peter Dempsey for his support this year too."

Ardie Greenamyre: "There's a lot of young talent up here on the podium. It's fun to watch them.

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“We clinched the National championship, but my race wasn’t without its moments. My car’s front wing was shaking more than half of the race. I didn’t have enough of a gap on J.R. to pit for the crew to check it, so I just kept going and hoped it would hold together. Luckily it did!”

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 Salinas, 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.

About the Cooper Tires Presents the USF2000 National Championship Powered by Mazda:

Many top drivers in the IZOD IndyCar Series and endurance sports car racing honed their skills in F2000, and the Cooper Tires Presents the USF2000 National Championship Powered by Mazda is an important training ground for rising stars.

Debuting in 2010, it is the revival of the very popular USF2000 series of 1990 through 2006. Sanctioned by the Indy Racing League, it is the first step on its Road to Indy ladder system, preceding Star Mazda and Firestone Indy Lights.

It is also part of the prestigious MAZDASPEED Motorsports driver development program. The top driver in the series’ Championship class earns a scholarship package from Mazda valued at \$350,000 to help him or her advance to Star Mazda the following season.

USF2000 races are contested on road courses, street courses and ovals in order to give the series’ drivers experience on all the different types of tracks they will face as they proceed up the ladder.

For more information visit USF2000.com.