



Trying to develop American talent

Jeannie Broussal | Posted: Wednesday, August 24, 2011 10:52 pm

With the influx of international drivers into the IndyCar Series during the 1980s, American drivers are now the minority in a series they once dominated.

There are several reasons for this turnaround. When international drivers — who had no place to move up in their homelands — saw an opportunity to compete in a world class series in the United States, they began migrating to IndyCar.

With the emergence of NASCAR, more young American drivers decided to turn to stock cars.

Another reason is many young American drivers became confused about which step to take after competing in go-karts to get to IndyCar.

Some made mistakes that put them way behind in their careers, and some gave up altogether.

Tony George, Jr., the manager of business development for Firestone Indy Lights and the Mazda Road to Indy Program, talked about why he thinks there are not more American drivers in IndyCar.

“It’s all about relevant training and experience for those who want to make it in open-wheel racing. A lot of grassroots motorsports didn’t change with the times with regards to new technology. When grassroots drivers are getting out-of-date training, it won’t take them to IndyCar,” George said.

With the recent formation of the “Road to Indy” program, there is a much clearer path for would-be IndyCar race drivers.

The program is fully funded by Mazda USA.

Here are the basics of the program:

Level 1: USF2000 Series champion gets a full scholarship into the StarMazda Series

Level 2: StarMazda Series champion gets a full scholarship into Indy Lights

Level Three: Indy Lights champion gets a partial scholarship into IndyCar

Randy Bernard, the CEO of IndyCar, IZOD IndyCar series and Firestone Indy Lights Series, agreed.

“As a series, the most important thing we have to do is have the best drivers in the world,” he said. “We want to be known as the fastest, most versatile series in the world.”

George also talked about the big change that came to IndyCar when big tobacco companies were no longer legally able to sponsor cars.

“When cigarette money was no longer involved in the sport, a lot of the lifestyles that racers had enjoyed ended. That’s where ride buying came from. It was a huge adjustment in our sport and one I think we are still recovering from,” he said.

“My No. 1 goal is to develop domestic talent that is going to capture American fans and to develop domestic sponsors. Brazil and other markets around the world see great value to racing in IndyCar. We need more domestic partners and American ‘superstars,’ so fans will buy the products of domestic sponsors,” he added.

Taking the ‘Road to Indy’

Before open-wheel racing split into two series in the early 1990s, it had begun to add more road and street courses to its racing schedule, which in turn brought more international drivers into open-wheel racing, because that is what they raced in their homelands.

In 2010, when Bernard took over as head of the IndyCar Series, one of his main goals was to keep a balance of oval and road and street course races in the IndyCar series.

“Having a balance of ovals and road and street courses allows American drivers to compete seriously in our series,” he said.

Bernard also feels that establishing a plan for young drivers with the “Road to Indy” program is important.

“We need credibility with our fan base, and there is no doubt the more exposure we can get drivers in their early years, the more fans and sponsorship they will have,” he said.

Although the Mazda “Road to Indy” program is fairly new, it is working as it should.

The 2010 USF2000 champion, Sage Karam, an American, is competing in the StarMazda Series on a full scholarship.

The 2010 StarMazda champion, Conor Daly (American), is competing in Indy Lights with Mazda funding, and 2010 Indy Lights champion JR Hildebrand is competing in the IndyCar Series this year with a partial scholarship.

Current IndyCar drivers Marco Andretti, Graham Rahal and James Hinchcliffe are all former graduates of StarMazda.

Connor De Phillippi, an American, is competing in the StarMazda Series and is now in second place in championship points, 13 behind leader Tristan Vautier.

De Phillippi came up through the go-kart ranks and then won a scholarship from Mazda to go to the Skip Barber Racing School, where he competed in the Western Regional Series, then the National Series.

He was the 2009 Skip Barber National Series champion and received a scholarship to race in StarMazda in 2010, where he finished third overall and was awarded Rookie of the Year honors.

De Phillippi said whether or not he wins the StarMazda championship this year, his plans are to race in Indy Lights next year. He is already working on getting sponsorship.

With plans in the works to televise the entire Indy Lights schedule for 2012, De Phillippi said that would make things much better for Indy Lights because of sponsors who want to be on TV.

He also said that before the “Road to Indy” program, it wasn’t necessarily the best drivers who moved up, but rather it was the drivers with the most money.

De Phillippi is proud of the fact that unlike most young drivers, his family did not have a lot of money to put into his racing career, so he has succeeded on his talent and that is what has enabled him in his racing career.

Coming to Sonoma

De Phillippi will be racing at Infineon Raceway this weekend in the StarMazda race. He has never raced at Infineon, but he did participate in a one-day testing session at the track last week.

“It’s going to be a really close race,” he said. “In our practice session the times were very close. It’s going to be fun. It’s a very fast track and it is hard on tires. Our car has been superior on long runs this year, so that may give us an advantage at Infineon.”

Although the Mazda “Road to Indy” program seems to be exactly what was needed for up-and-coming open-wheel drivers, excluding other open-wheel series that are not in the program as viable options to progress in open-wheel racing would be wrong.

Formula Car Challenge is a regionalized open-wheel racing series with an annual national championship. There are multiple regions across the country, and each region has unique features and events. It is a multi-class format featuring Formula Mazda (FM), Pro Formula Mazda (PFM), and FormulaSPEED2.0 (FS2.0).

Moses Smith, a former StarMazda, Toyota Atlantic and Indy Lights driver who currently runs in the NASCAR K&N Pro West Series, heads up the Southwest region of Formula Mazda and the Formula Car Challenge presented by Goodyear Southwest Series.

Smith, who recently relocated from Phoenix to Texas and operates Texas Autosports FM, LLC in Cresson, Tex., holds the manufacturing rights for Formula Mazda and Formula Mazda parts. His shop does the entire race prep and race support. Except for engines, Smith's company manufactures the whole Formula Mazda race car from chassis, to bodywork and everything in between.

Texas Autosports will be bringing five cars to race in the Formula Car Challenge races at Infineon Raceway during the Indy Grand Prix of Sonoma race weekend.

Smith's drivers include Alan McCallum, winner of last year's event at Infineon, and the 2010 FCC National Champion in the FM Class. Davis Parr, a regular podium finisher in the Southwest FCC Region in the FM class, finished second in the 2010 Southwest point standings. George Jackson, who is in his second year in Formula Mazda, comes from a sprint car background and is always a contender in the Southwest Region events. Kerry Law, who is running a limited schedule in SCCA SoCal and Arizona, has won three out of the four races he has entered in 2011.

All five drivers are American.

Smith said even though Formula Mazda is not on the Mazda "Road to Indy" program, he thinks there are many drivers from Formula Mazda, Pro Formula Mazda and FormulaSPEED 2.0 who are well-qualified to move into the "Road to Indy" program. He is currently working on putting together a StarMazda ride for Alan McCallum.

Open-wheel racing's future looks good

There is no simple answer as to why there are not more American drivers in IndyCar. It is complex. There seems to be a variety of reasons.

To sum it up, when Emerson Fittipaldi came to America and found success in the IndyCar Series, many international drivers followed suit because there was far more opportunity in open-wheel racing in America than any other country in the world.

When NASCAR busted out of the south and became hugely popular across the U.S., more young American drivers went looking there for a career in racing. A lot of sponsorship money that IndyCar once had left and went to NASCAR because of the huge popularity of the series — and because fans tended to buy more of their products in NASCAR.

NASCAR is largely made up of American drivers who have huge fan bases. NASCAR races are televised, even down through the lower series.

In open-wheel racing, IndyCar is the only series where every race is televised.

Indy Lights has only six races televised, and USF2000 and StarMazda are not televised at all.

But there is definitely a bright side to IndyCar's future.

With the new Mazda "Road to Indy" Program, more young American drivers are becoming involved in open-wheel racing again, because they can see a clear-cut path to follow to get the training and experience they need to get to the top.

The Mazda "Road to Indy" program also offers drivers help with marketing themselves, which is huge in developing sponsorship and achieving big American fan bases.

IndyCar is also finalizing a deal that will televise all Firestone Indy Lights Series races in 2012. It has only been three years since the two top open-wheel series became united together as one series again.

It is going to take some time for everything to jell in IndyCar, but the series is well on its way to gaining back the interest, popularity, fans and great young American drivers it has had in the past.

You can see for yourself how exciting open-wheel racing is this weekend at Infineon Raceway in Sonoma, at the Indy Grand Prix of Sonoma.

There will be five racing series participating over the two-day event.

The IndyCar Series, Formula Car Challenge, presented by Goodyear, the Historic Grand Prix, the SCCA Pro Racing World Challenge Championships, and the StarMazda Championship presented by Goodyear will all be racing.

For more information, visit www.infineonrace.com

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