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Test Driver Says New USF2000 Package Takes Car to a Whole New Level

SEBRING, Fla., Jan. 22 — Manufacturers, team representatives, engineers and mechanics were pleased with what they saw yesterday at Sebring International Raceway as the USF2000 National Championship tested four compounds of Cooper Racing Tires and several components that will be used in the series' top class, the Championship class, this year.

Perhaps the person who was most impressed, however, was the test driver, Jonny Baker, who finished second in another F2000 series in 2008.

Although the Van Diemen Baker drove on Thursday was powered by a Zetec engine rather than the brand-new Mazda MZR engine that is destined to become the spec engine of the series' premier class, Baker was more than impressed with the car's improvements.

"The little bit of extra power from the aero improvements and the better braking have taken this car to a whole new level," Baker said after completing about 70 laps during the test. "It's a big step in the right direction."

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Baker tested a 2001 Van Diemen updated with many new components, including new wings, nose, dampers, uprights, brakes and diffuser.

Engineers from Cooper Racing Tires were on hand to evaluate four different tire compounds, and selected the one that will be the spec slick tire for the series.

Darrick Dong from Performance Friction oversaw the car's brakes, which drew rave reviews.

Representatives from JDC MotorSports, AIM Autosport, Cape Motorsports and Liberty Motorsports were also on hand to watch the test and provide input from the team owner's point of view.

"Cooper Tires' support was impressive," said Geoff Fickling, the USF2000 series' research and development consultant. "We had four choices of compounds, and we could have chosen any of the four and had a good tire. In the end they chose the compound that was the most durable and the one the driver liked the best."

"I did about 15 to 20 laps on each compound, and it went really well," Baker said. "I was super-impressed with the guys who work for Cooper. They had a strict program that they wanted me to follow, and I ran nice, consistent laps. The new Élan aero package worked very well, and we pretty much determined which tire compound we're going to use."

Baker was also enthusiastic about the car's new Performance Friction brakes. "They were absolutely fantastic," he said.

"The brakes were awesome," Fickling added. "Darrick Dong's setting up of the brakes was spot-on, and we had no issues with the brakes at all."

Sanctioned by the Indy Racing League (IRL), the USF2000 National Championship is one of only two series that are part of both the IRL's Road to Indy ladder system and the MAZ-DASPEED Motorsports driver development program. The series' 2010 season will open with a doubleheader March 27-28 on the street circuit in St. Petersburg, Fla. in support of an IZOD IndyCar Series headliner.

For the rest of the schedule and additional information on the series, see usf2000.com or call (941) 723-3900.

Although the USF2000 series' Championship class is open only to Van Diemens, any car that meets the current SCCA Formula Continental rules may be entered in its National class.

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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.

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.