

CLASS OF '17

The first rung on the Mazda Road to Indy offers a first look at its new-for-2017 USF2000 chassis. The same car in modified form has a future in Pro Mazda from 2018 onward, too.

WORDS Mark Glendenning
MAIN IMAGE Mazda Road to Indy/Tatuus

An overhaul of the USF2000 car has been a long time coming, but the series' promoter believes the new USF-17 will be worth the wait.

In 1999, Cher was the highest-charting singer in the country with "Believe," "Saving Private Ryan" was awarded Best Picture at the Oscars, and Dan Wheldon won the USF2000 championship in the then-brand-new Van Diemen/Elan chassis.

Fast-forward to the present day, and that chassis is still on active duty, preparing for a final, 16-race send-off in the 2016 Cooper Tires USF2000 Championship Presented by Mazda, before finally taking a well-earned retirement. When you consider how fast technology moves in motorsport, 17 years is more than enough waiting for a new-generation car. According to Wikipedia, Cher's done three farewell tours in that time...

Predictably, the car that will replace the Elan, the Taatus-built USF-17, is a

significant technical upgrade over its predecessor, but the chassis' secret weapon is its versatility: following its USF2000 debut next season, the same chassis will also form the basis of the new Pro Mazda Presented by Cooper Tires racer that is set to be rolled out for 2018.

"As a team owner you want to have flexibility, so from the team point of view, if you own a fleet of USF2000 cars and a fleet of Pro Mazda cars, and you can't fill all of your seats, you've got a lot of empty rolling stock," Andersen Promotions' Dan Andersen tells *RACER*.

"But if you have a car that can go back and forth, you may not have to buy as many cars. And if one year you have a lot of interest in USF2000 and the next year the interest changes to Pro Mazda, you're

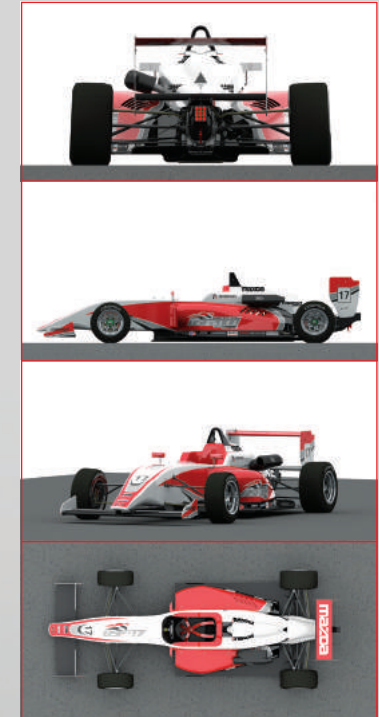
not stuck with idle vehicles."

A USF2000 chassis will cost \$51,400, minus engine, wheels and dampers.

So far, the USF-17 has only been seen in render form (MAIN and RIGHT), with the first prototype scheduled to be publicly unveiled during the buildup to the 100th Indianapolis 500 in May.

Testing will begin the following month, and teams are scheduled to start taking delivery of their new cars in the fall. A similar rollout schedule is planned for the car's Pro Mazda counterpart.

The arrival of the new USF2000 and Pro Mazda chassis will complete the refreshing of the Mazda Road to Indy lineup, which began with the introduction of the widely-acclaimed new IL-15 Indy Lights car last year.



AT A GLANCE

The USF-17 represents more than just a facelift – a lot more. The move from a tube-frame to a composite chassis gives it some 21st century credibility, while Mazda's 2-liter, four-cylinder MZR engine will deliver some 170hp, put through a six-speed, paddle-shift gearbox. Other new features include revised brakes and dampers, an LCD steering wheel and ECU, and IndyCar-specific quick jack and roll hoop attachments.



UP TO SPEED ON THE FAST TRACK TO INDY

For the latest from the Mazda Road to Indy ladder, go to indylights.com for Indy Lights Presented by Cooper Tires, promazda.com for Pro Mazda Championship Presented by Cooper Tires and usf2000.com for the Cooper Tires USF2000 Championship Powered by Mazda.





(LEFT) Felix Rosenqvist keeps busy... In addition to Indy Lights, he'll share a Mercedes-AMG GT3 with Tristan Vautier in the Blancpain Series, and act as a reserve driver for Mercedes in the DTM. (BELOW) Santiago Urrutia.

Chris Owens/IMS Photo



IS THIS BRAZIL'S NEXT BIG THING?

Felipe Ortiz has spent the last few years building a name for himself in Brazil, and the 17-year-old will hope to create a similar impression with his first foray into American racing this season as part of Afterburner Autosport's USF2000 lineup.

"Afterburner is a great team and I'm pretty sure we'll be on the podium this year," said Ortiz, who will be based in Orlando, Fla. "Competing in USF2000 is a dream come true - I have been aiming for this since I started racing karts in Brazil."



For the latest from the USF2000 championship, go to usf2000.com

LIGHTING UP LIGHTS

THERE'S PLENTY OF TALENT AT THE SHARP END OF THIS YEAR'S LIGHTS FIELD.

The 2016 car count is set to be up from the '15 figure, and if confirmation of Felix Rosenqvist as part of Belardi's Indy Lights Presented by Cooper Tires line-up for 2016 is any indicator, the series will not be short on serious quality, too.

The Swede arrives in the series as the reigning champion in the competitive European Formula 3 Championship, and has also won the prestigious F3 events at Macau (twice), Zandvoort (twice) and Pau. His road course credentials were on display when he topped the times in pre-season testing at Sebring, although he was 12th at the end of his first oval test in Phoenix.



Chris Jones/IMS Photo



For the latest from Indy Lights, head to indylights.com

Among those taking the fight to Rosenqvist will be RC Enerson, who was fourth in last year's championship and topped the Phoenix test for Schmidt, just ahead of teammate and reigning Pro Mazda champion Santiago Urrutia.

Another newcomer worth keeping an eye on will be Britain's Dean Stoneman, who'll form part of Andretti's three-pronged attack. Stoneman won the Formula 2 championship in 2010, but a cancer diagnosis sidelined him for two years of treatment and recovery. Since his return, he has finished runner-up in the 2014 GP3 championship.



Chris Owens/IMS photo

IT'S NICO TIME

RUNAWAY USF2000 CHAMP NICO JAMIN TAKES THE NEXT STEP

Do you remember the first USF2000 race at Barber last year? Nico Jamin does. It was the only time all season that he didn't finish on the podium.

An impressive 10 wins and an inevitable championship later, the 20-year-old Frenchman earned a promotion into Pro Mazda, the next rung on the Mazda Road to Indy ladder, and was an early pace-setter in testing at COTA (left).

"It was a struggle at the beginning of

the day at COTA, but we figured out the setup and finished with the best lap with quite a big gap - so it was a great in the end!" he noted.

Among those also graduating from USF2000 is last year's runner-up Jake Eidson, who will suit up alongside Jamin at Cape Motorsports Wayne Taylor Racing, and Aaron Telitz, who was third in the points in 2015 and will be racing with Team Pelfrey.



For the latest from Pro Mazda, check out promazda.com