



WORDS Mark Glendenning MAIN IMAGE Chris Owens/IMS

MOVING ON UP

A new season means a new wave of fast and talented Mazda Road to Indy graduates preparing to move one step closer to their dream of racing in the Verizon IndyCar Series.

(MAIN) Taking the next step... Last year's Pro Mazda champion Santiago Urrutia puts his 2016 Schmidt Indy Lights ride through its paces during pre-season testing at Phoenix International Raceway.



Chris Owens/IMS Photo



Chris Owens/IMS Photo



Chris Owens/IMS Photo



THREE STEPS TO THE TOP

The fast track to the IndyCar Series offers new challenges every step along the way.

STEP 1...



The perfect training ground for young drivers stepping up from the Skip Barber Racing School, USF2000 cars produce 170hp and are a lot of newbie racers' first encounter with a true slicks-and-wings racecar. USF2000 also offers most drivers their first chance to experience oval racing.

STEP 2...



The Pro Mazda series tends to produce some of the best racing in America, with a tightly packed field of young talent getting used to racecars that push out 255hp, have far shorter braking zones than USF2000 cars, and create the need for drivers to master the art of tire management.

STEP 3...



To prepare Indy Lights drivers for their ultimate destination, the Verizon IndyCar Series, the Dallara IL15 emulates the handling characteristics of IndyCar's DW12. Its two-liter turbocharged Mazda engine produces 450hp, with an extra 50hp on tap for push-to-pass boost. This, too, has a power curve that delivers in the manner of an IndyCar engine.

YOU'VE ARRIVED...



...at your destination, the Verizon IndyCar Series.

If you're looking for proof of how well the Mazda Road to Indy works as the official ladder program for the Verizon IndyCar Series, you don't need to go combing through entry lists looking for the lucky few who've managed to claw themselves a path to the next level. Instead, you just have to look out at the race track.

Here comes Santiago Urrutia, testing his Schmidt Peterson Motorsports Indy Lights car. A few months ago, the Uruguayan was celebrating winning the 2015 Pro Mazda championship. And the opportunity to race in Indy Lights, the final step on the ladder to IndyCar, is his prize for 2016.

Over there is Nico Jamin, last year's

runaway USF2000 champion who's now preparing for his first season at the next level, Pro Mazda. Like Urrutia, whom he'll spend this year trying to emulate, Jamin earned his new ride by winning.

Each step of the ladder leads to the next, culminating in one driver earning the Indy Lights championship and a \$1 million scholarship which provides entry into three rounds of the IndyCar Series, including the Indianapolis 500. For 2016, that life-changing opportunity goes to Spencer Pigot.

As one of the young guns hoping to follow Pigot in 2017, Urrutia is excited by the momentum the ladder provides.

"I'm very happy to be going into Indy

"THE WHEEL-TO-WHEEL OVAL EXPERIENCE YOU GET ON THE MAZDA ROAD TO INDY LADDER IS INVALUABLE"

JAMES HINCHCLIFFE

Lights; it's one of the best categories in the world for preparing you to go into a top series like IndyCar," he says. "If I win, I'll get a chance to race in IndyCar. Drivers who I raced against in GP3 in Europe, even if they had a strong season, couldn't move up to GP2 unless they found the money. That's what is so special about the Mazda Road to Indy. Plus, the

IndyCar teams are watching, too."

That potential to win your way into a top-level pro series, rather than having to rely on funding, is luring an increasingly impressive lineup of drivers from European categories. Belardi recently announced that reigning Formula 3 Euro Series champion and two-time Macau GP winner Felix Rosenqvist will move across the Atlantic to join the Lights field this year.

"Racing on this side of the world will be very different to what I'm used to, but it's a challenge I'm relishing," said the Swede.

There are other benefits. Lights graduate and IndyCar Series race winner James Hinchcliffe points to the oval

experience that MRTI drivers are exposed to relatively early in their career.

"One of the most daunting things you can do is run your first laps at Indianapolis," he says. "So getting some wheel-to-wheel action and oval experience before you have to do it with pit stops and 32 other cars is invaluable. I can't imagine having to learn oval racing at this [IndyCar] level."

If the presence of a guy like Rosenqvist is proof of the system's potency, the real vindication lies in the Jamins, Urrutias and Pigots reaping the rewards of their success. Any championship can give you a trophy. But if a driver is talented enough, the Mazda Road to Indy can give them a career. 🏆

(TOP) Euro F3 star Felix Rosenqvist is switching to Indy Lights this year, while (ABOVE) two of last year's USF2000 shining lights, Jake Eidson (left) and champ Nico Jamin, are preparing for the step up to the cut and thrust of Pro Mazda racing (CENTER).