



USF2000 DRIVER STEPHENS CONTINUES TO #DEFYLABELS

By Jay Smith | Published: Feb 25, 2016



When MINI Cooper selected Michai Stephens to be part of its Super Bowl television commercial with the #DefyLabels theme, it couldn't have made a more appropriate choice. Stephens has been defying labels all of his 24 years.

It began with his heritage. Stephens is the epitome of a melting pot American – his father of African-American and Italian descent and his mother a Jewish-American.

"I've never experienced noticeable treatment based on my racial makeup, though curiosity about me is ever present," Stephens said. "As with all of us, layers of experience have made the real me. Key individuals in my life have encouraged me to use every one of those layers to my advantage."

"However, at times, the elite nature of our sport can limit natural talent and possibilities. I feel like I am part of the next generation of racers, an individual coming from an African-American/Italian father and Jewish-American mother, with an unbelievable opportunity to unlock a seemingly elusive dream."

Though he'd dreamed of being a race car driver or designer since he spent countless hours as a boy playing with Hot Wheels on his mother's bedspread in Evanston, Ill., Stephens never slid into the cockpit of a race car until 2012 at age 20 – nearly a decade later than many of his fellow competitors.

Less than four years later, the driver he said some considered "too old, no hope, not enough money" will drive for RJB Motorsports, a rookie team in the Cooper Tires USF2000 Championship Powered by Mazda – the first rung of the Mazda Road to Indy stepladder.

After graduating high school in Illinois, Stephens attended Arizona State University because it offered a major in industrial design. He saw it as an opportunity to enter the world of racing. So despite growing up a child that was "afraid to leave home," he set out on the 2,000-mile journey to Tempe, Ariz.

The idea was to get the degree, design race cars and, with a little luck, maybe get to take the car out for one lap. But those aspirations quickly crashed back to reality.

The loss of his great-grandparents proved difficult and student loan debt began to rise. Faced with another crossroads, Stephens returned home. On a chilly Chicago afternoon, he decided to search "how to become a race car driver" online.

The search yielded the Skip Barber Racing School, which had just created a new format for aspiring racers with no prior karting or racing experience. The winner of the Skip Barber IndyCar Academy Shootout competition would earn a paid season in the Skip Barber national series.

Stephens won the 2013 shootout to secure the ride in the 2014 Skip Barber Racing Summer Series, where he had six race wins and nine pole positions. That helped him earn a Team USA Scholarship to participate in the prestigious Formula Ford Festival and Walter Hayes Trophy events in England, finishing third in the latter among a field of 120 racers from around the world.

Despite not being able to secure a fulltime ride in 2015, Stephens earned a second Team USA Scholarship – only the third driver to do so consecutively in the scholarship's 25-year history – to gain more valuable track time at the two races in England. Now he's looking forward to his full USF2000 slate in 2016.

"An incredible and priceless opportunity has magically fallen into place," Stephens said. "Thanks to Metalloid and RJB Motorsports, we will join forces and encourage one another to the best results possible. To have been selected for a once-in-a-blue-moon opportunity like this by Fred (Edwards, CEO of sponsor Metalloid Corp.) and RJB only fuels the fire that burns bright inside."

And let Michai Stephens continue to #DefyLabels.

IN THE NEWS

DEC 30

Sports car and IndyCar racer John Paul Jr dies at 60
RACER.com

DEC 14

Sato's 2020 Indy-winning chassis retired
RACER.com

NOV 09

MILLER: How IndyCar's promoters helped save the season
RACER.com





RESOURCES	EXPERIENCE INDYCAR	SHOP INDYCAR	INDYCAR CORPORATE	IMS CORPORATE
Event Schedule	Timing & Scoring	Mens	Career Opportunities	IMS.com
PDF Schedule	INDYCAR Nation	Womens	Road To Indy	IMS Tickets
	INDYCAR Mobile	Kids	Media Site	IMS Productions
	Videos	Souvenirs	Sponsors	IMS Media Site
	Photos	Diecast Cars	Contact Us	Online Store
	INDYCAR 101			

2020 INDYCAR® IS A REGISTERED TRADEMARK OF BRICKYARD TRADEMARKS, INC. / [PRIVACY POLICY & TERMS OF USE](#)