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MRTI catches up with Michai Stephens ahead of season opener

By Tony DiZinno Feb 17, 2016, 4:13 PM EST



Photo: RJB Motorsports

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This is a name you should know if you're following North American open-wheel racing: two-time Team USA Scholarship recipient Michai Stephens.

[Stephens filed his latest blog for the Team USA Scholarship website last week](#), and ahead of his debut season in the Cooper Tires USF2000 Championship Powered by Mazda series with RJB Motorsports, he was also profiled in the latest Mazda Road to Indy "Meet the Driver" series.

That interview is below:

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Growing up in Evanston, Ill., as the oldest of three boys, Michai Stephens never told his family of his desire to be a race car driver. But a Skip Barber shootout victory and two stints as a Team USA Scholarship winner put the 24-year-old on the fast track to a racing career. As a newcomer in the Cooper Tires USF2000 Championship Powered by Mazda driving for rookie team RJB Motorsports, Stephens is on his way to realizing his dream with the help of the Mazda Road to Indy.

What first got you interested in racing?

I remember riding a two-wheeler around when I was 2 years old pretending it was a race car! I played just about every stick-and-ball sport you can imagine, all the while keeping my desire to be a race car driver to myself. My family didn't have any motorsports background.

I went to Arizona State University to get a degree in Industrial Design with the idea that I would go into automotive design. I had natural art ability and I thought if I could design a race car, I could ask to drive it on track for one day! But both of my great-grandparents passed away within a month of each other toward the end of the school year.

They were two of the most influential people in my life (my great-grandfather passed his art ability on to me) and when I was at home, I had the thought to research what it took to be a race car driver. I read that the Skip Barber Racing School had a shootout to earn a scholarship for people with no prior racing experience – all I had to do was take a three-day, then a two-day racing class. I'd been working in construction, so I had the money to pay for the school. I went to Sebring feeling as confident as I've ever felt in my life.

How did your racing career progress once you finished the Skip Barber class?

I ended up winning the scholarship to race in the Skip Barber Summer Series in 2014. Early that year, I heard about the Team USA Scholarship, which sends two drivers to England for Formula Ford racing. I met with Jeremy Shaw and he invited me to the shootout which was the following week in Fontana. With all the guys that were there, I

couldn't believe he chose me to go with Aaron Telitz to England! There were crazy highs and crazy lows, but it was an amazing experience – and I finished third in the Walter Hayes Trophy at Silverstone.

When I got home, it was time for the year-end Skip Barber Shootout, for a scholarship into the 2015 USF2000 series. I won the Shootout on total points, but there was a dropped race so I ended up losing by less than two points. That put me back at Square One, but I did everything I could to keep at it. I taught at Skip Barber to make ends meet and went to races when I could.

Then I was invited to try out for Team USA again and I won, joining Dakota Dickerson in England. I had two podium finishes at the Formula Ford Festival at Brands Hatch and was seventh in the final race – which was probably the craziest race I've been in! I finished second in the heat race at Silverstone but had car-to-car contact in the semi-final, which ripped the steering wheel out of my hand and broke my thumb. I was nominated for the Mazda Road to 24 Shootout but had to miss it because of my thumb. But as I was headed out of the doctor's office after surgery, I received a phone call from Fred Edwards at RJB Motorsports asking if I wanted to run USF2000 in 2016. I almost dropped the phone – and now I'm here.

Being one of only five two-time Team USA Scholarship winners has to be especially gratifying.

It's so competitive in the Mazda Road to Indy now and there are so many opportunities that come from it, so any advantage you can get means a great deal. My time in England felt more like a year than just a month. I learned so much.

What got you interested in the Mazda Road to Indy and the USF2000 series?

If there was no Mazda Road to Indy, I wouldn't be here. I wouldn't have had anywhere to go in 2015. It's given me a connecting point and I've been able to meet so many people in the sport. To be able to ask of advice of a Mike Hull, or the Rahal guys, is so valuable. The scholarships are so important but what matters to me is the chance to grow up here and become an American open-wheel driver – someone who starts here and stays here, representing the United States.

What are your expectations for 2016?

I want to remain focused on what it's going to take to have a long career in the sport, to put together the fundamental building blocks day in and day out. If we get the team rolling in the right direction, start rising up in the timing charts and are able to be fighting for podiums by the end of the season, that would be great.

What is your favorite racetrack and what is your best memory about that track?

I won my first-ever race at Mid-Ohio and then swept the weekend by passing near the finish on the outside. That really stands out!

What kind of activities do you do away from the race car?

Essentially, everything that I do has a racing tie. If I'm playing basketball, I'm trying to shoot with my left hand so that makes me a better race car driver. Or if I'm swimming, I try to breathe better. But spending time with my family is my main focus away from the race car.

If I wasn't driving a race car, I'd be _____.

If I wasn't racing I'd probably be working with kids in some way, in some sort of athletic environment.

Finally, where does the name Michai come from?

It's from my Jewish roots, on my Mom's side of the family, which includes my great-grandparents. My mom came up with my name. "Chai" means life in Hebrew and she added the "Mi" before it to make it a name.

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