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Daly to walk away from championship lead - Q&A

MAZDASPEED driver Conor Daly dominated the Star Mazda championship last season setting new records in just about every category. 2011 has started off in a similar fashion having just completed a remarkable start to his season between testing GP3 in three different countries, a grueling transatlantic travel schedule and winning the Firestone Indy Lights race on the famed streets of Long Beach after missing Friday's practice. His Long Beach success in addition to his second place finish at the season opener in St. Petersburg, Florida, has vaulted him to the top of the Indy Lights championship. Daly will however now walk away from his championship lead and move to Europe where he will concentrate on the Formula One support series, GP3 with the British based Carlin team. He recently answered questions about his career decisions and direction.

What was it like to win Long Beach?

First you have to understand that I've been to Long Beach as a spectator since I was a small boy. It was always one of the coolest places to see racing. With the possibility of missing Friday's practice, I had the option to drop Long Beach from my Lights schedule a few months ago but I insisted that no matter what sleep or practice I missed, I wanted to race at Long Beach. When I crossed the finish line I could hardly believe what had just happened. Long Beach is such an icon of American motorsports that to win there has a special sense of satisfaction - especially after missing all of Friday. It was the coolest podium and just great to see my Sam Schmidt team with such big smiles on their faces. I did take a few days off in California after the race.

Why would you leave the Indy Lights championship when you are leading the points?

The Indy Lights opportunity came after we had confirmed my GP3 deal in Europe so it was never meant to be a full season deal. However, it has gone so well that I think I'll miss it. I'll be back to do two more races at the end of the season, Trois Rivieres, Canada in August and Baltimore in September.

Why did you make the decision to do GP3?

When the Atlantic series collapsed in 2010 we looked at the best possibly training ground for me to become the very best professional I could be and that's when the possibility of competing in Europe first came up. We went to Montreal last year and after a discussion with Frank Williams it became apparent that no matter what I did in America, few in F1 would take notice and I really had to prove myself in Europe. We

then went to Monza to see GP3 in action and the decision was made that that was the route I would take.

Do you feel that you are walking out on the Mazda Road to Indy?

The Mazda Road to Indy is a great support system for drivers but it did not exist when my plans for GP3 were made. Mazda stayed supportive of me because I sort of got caught in a bit of a vacuum when the Atlantic series collapsed and they helped me put the whole 2011 program together, including GP3. Europe will be a difficult road for me but if I can do three good hard years there, I believe I can become a better driver and although it might not be in the official Mazda development ladder, my major career moves so far have been because of the Mazda support.

What's the difference between the GP3 car and the Indy Lights car?

The Indy Lights car is a lot heavier, the brakes are not as good but the power is great. The Lights car sounds good and the GP3 is terrible because it's a turbo. The GP3 car has great brakes and enters corners very fast. The Pirelli tires on the GP3 need a high level of management to first get the fastest laps possible and then to make them last a full race distance. The Firestone's on the Lights car are as user friendly as could be.

Has it been difficult to adjust to two different cars?

I don't think so even though the cars are vastly different. Usually within a few laps I can adjust. The difficulty I have had was knowing what the car liked and knowing how to drive each one to get the best from it. I was off the pace for the first three Lights test days but after day four I had it worked out and in the first three races we have been fastest. I'm not yet on top of the GP3 car but because it is a lot more complex, it will probably take me longer to work things out.

By the time you start the season in Turkey, you will have crossed the Atlantic seven times - has this been difficult?

Not as bad as I thought. I tend to sleep whenever I can and the back to back weekends (Barber & Long Beach) with Barcelona testing in the middle of the week should have been the most difficult but I think the adrenaline was pumping so much that it kept me on a high and I had my best day of my career winning Long Beach after the toughest travel time I've ever experienced - maybe I should do more travel.

Will you live in Europe or will you travel back in forth?

I will move to England and live there for the season. I want to travel as much with the team as possible and want to generally become immersed in the culture of European racing. GP3 will be difficult for me this year and I don't think I want to add the difficulty of traveling back and forth.