



## Toppe Dominates Opening Round at Sebring

**SEBRING, Fla. (March 17, 2016)** – Clark Toppe is the leading returning driver in the Mazda Prototype Lites Presented by Cooper Tires series this season, and he reinforced that status Thursday with a dominant victory in Round 1 at Sebring International Raceway.

Toppe, 18, from The Woodlands, Texas, took the lead about five minutes into the 30-minute race for the International Motor Sports Association (IMSA) Official Development Series and never trailed thereafter in the No. 10 JDC Motorsports entry. Toppe, who finished second in the Lites 1 standings last season, beat rookie Patricio O'Ward to the finish by 6.296 seconds.

"I pushed as hard as I could to advance through and get the win," Toppe said. "JDC put an awesome car together for me, and I can't thank Mazda and Cooper Tires enough for building those cars and the support they give us."

O'Ward, 16, from Monterrey, Mexico, finished on the podium in his first career Mazda Prototype Lites Presented by Cooper Tires start in the No. 16 Performance Tech entry. Pole sitter Austin Versteeg, 16, from Sandy, Utah, was third in the No. 7 JDC Motorsport entry.

Michael Whelden, from Sonoma, California, finished fourth in the No. 14 World Speed Motorsports Élan DP02 chassis powered by a Mazda engine and on Cooper Tires in his first series start. Rookie Kyle Masson, from Windermere, Florida, rounded out the top five in the No. 18 Performance Tech Motorsports car.

Gerry Kraut, from St. Paul, Minnesota, earned his first Lites 1 Masters victory since 2013. Max DeAngelis, from Belle River, Ontario, won the Lites 2 class.

Versteeg led the field into Turn 1 of the race, building a lead of .582 of a second over O'Ward after the first lap around the historic, 17-turn, 3.74-mile circuit. But O'Ward passed him on the second lap to take the lead.

"The start was really good, and the first lap was good," Versteeg said. "I was able to get a little bit of a gap. But then honestly I overdrove the car, and that's how Pato was able to get around me and then Clark (Toppe)."

"A lot of it was driving and adjusting to the conditions. I struggled with the car a little bit in the high-speed stuff but not enough to really make a difference. Overall, positive first



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race, and we'll have to work and see what we can get tomorrow.”

O'Ward's lead was short-lived. Toppe passed him for the lead on the third lap and never trailed thereafter.

“Clark was really fast,” O'Ward said. “It was hard to keep him behind me, and I wouldn't want to hit both of us out of the race. It's better to get a podium and score some points.”

Toppe overcame a sluggish start and inexorably pulled away from the field once he took the lead. His lead grew to 2.743 seconds with 12 minutes remaining. That gap expanded to 4.627 seconds just six minutes later, and he cruised to the finish.

“I misjudged where Austin was going to at the start and had to back out a little bit to let him have the lead,” Toppe said. “That led to me losing a few spots, and then I just had to dig myself back to the front.”

Toppe earned his fourth career Mazda Prototype Lites Presented by Cooper Tires victory. He won three races last season, the only victor in 2015 besides Lites 1 champion Kenton Koch.

JDC Motorsports also extended an extraordinary streak with Toppe's victory. The team, based in suburban Minnesota, has won the last 19 Mazda Prototype Lites Presented by Cooper Tires races, a streak dating back to August 2014.

## **Masters**

Kraut overcame a rough qualifying session Friday morning to earn his first victory since October 2013 at Road Atlanta in the No. 55 JDC Motorsports car.

Gerhard Watzinger, from Naples, Florida, finished second in the No. 32 ONE Motorsports entry. Naj Husain, from Great Falls, Virginia, finished third in the No. 3 Extreme Speed Motorsports car.

Kraut qualified third in the Masters class but took the lead approximately halfway through the race. Leading Masters qualifier Joel Janco spun off track in his No. 25 JDC Motorsports car after contact during a first-lap tangle, and Kraut was able to pass the No. 13 Team Perfect Pedal car of leader Gary Gibson to take the top spot, which he never surrendered.



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"I was hoping I would be able to work my way up through the field without a first- or second-corner accident," Kraut said. "I avoided some of the crashes and just worked as hard as I could and just put my head down and focus on my lap times and not on who was behind me or in front of me."

Watzinger passed Husain and held off his friendly rival, as the pair ended up just 1.106 seconds apart at the finish.

Husain earned his first Mazda Prototype Lites Presented by Cooper Tires podium finish at the start of his second season in the series.

"It's awesome to be starting the season on the podium," Husain said. "We've been working hard for the last year and half, and it's starting to pay off now, which is great."

### Up Next

Round 2, a 45-minute race, will start at 8 a.m. (ET) Friday, March 18.

For live timing, visit [scoring.imsa.com](http://scoring.imsa.com) or the IMSA mobile app for iOS, Android or Windows. For live updates on all the action, follow @IMSA Live on Twitter.

### ROUND 1 POST-RACE QUOTES

**CLARK TOPPE (No. 10 JDC Motorsports, winner):** "I misjudged where Austin (Versteeg) was going to at the start and had to back out a little bit to let him have the lead. That led to me losing a few spots, and then I just had to dig myself back to the front. I pushed as hard as I could to advance through and get the win. JDC put an awesome car together for me, and I can't thank Mazda and Cooper Tires enough for building those cars and the support they give us."

**PATRICIO O'WARD (No. 16 Performance Tech Motorsports, second):** "I think it was pretty decent. Obviously, everybody wants to win, but we made good progress with the setups throughout the week. The JDC cars were really good; their race pace was fantastic. So we've got to keep working and hopefully tomorrow we have something for them to give them some competition." (About leading briefly and then losing lead to Clark Toppe): "Clark was really fast. It was hard to keep him behind me, and I wouldn't want to hit both of us out of the race. It's better to get a podium and score some points. He was quicker than us, but you can't always win. We're going to keep working and hopefully have something for them tomorrow."



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**AUSTIN VERSTEEG (No. 7 JDC Motorsports, third):** “It’s been a really positive weekend so far this year coming from last year. We got that first checkpoint with earning the pole position today. I’m really happy with that. Qualifying was good. No complaints at all with the car, so it was a good way to start the season. The start was really good, and the first lap was good. I was able to get a little bit of a gap. But then honestly I overdrove the car, and that’s how Pato (O’Ward) was able to get around me and then Clark (Toppe). A lot of it was driving and adjusting to the conditions. I struggled with the car a little bit in the high-speed stuff but not enough to really make a difference. Overall, positive first race, and we’ll have to work and see what we can get tomorrow.”

**GERRY KRAUT (No. 55 JDC Motorsports, winner, Lites 1 Masters):** “I was hoping I would be able to work my way up through the field without a first- or second-corner accident. I avoided some of the crashes and just worked as hard as I could and just put my head down and focus on my lap times and not on who was behind me or in front of me.” (About first win since 2013): “It’s wonderful. Absolutely. My wife is happy, too.”

**GERHARD WATZINGER (No. 32 ONE Motorsports, second, Lites 1 Masters):** “It was green to green. That was a beautiful 30 minutes of racing. It was pretty warm, over 90 degrees. My colleague Naj Husain didn’t give me one moment to rest. I really had to push to catch him and had to push to keep him behind me. It was a fair race, a clean race and just enjoyed it. Sebring is always very special to me because it’s such a legendary track. I just love to race here. It’s the first time I’m on the podium here, so that makes it a very sweet day today.”

**NAJ HUSAIN (No. 3 Extreme Speed Motorsports, third, Lites 1 Masters):** “It was a great race. It was very competitive with Gerhard (Watzinger). We’ve been racing together now for quite a while, so it was a lot of fun. I’ve got to say thank you to the team. They did an awesome job preparing the car, and it worked beautifully and was smooth as could be. It’s awesome to be starting the season on the podium. We’ve been working hard for the last year and half, and it’s starting to pay off now, which is great.”

### **Mazda Prototype Lites Presented by Cooper Tires**

Mazda Prototype Lites Presented by Cooper Tires, an International Motor Sports Association (IMSA) Challenge Series, is in its 11<sup>th</sup> season in 2016. The series provides thrilling action and grooms drivers for future WeatherTech SportsCar Championship competition in the Prototype and Prototype Challenge classes.

The two classes of competition in the Mazda Prototype Lites Presented by Cooper Tires series take drivers and teams down unique, exciting roads of prototype sports car



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racing. Nimble, high-tech, purpose-built Lites 1 machines pack in the power with a 230-horsepower, 2-liter Mazda engine designed to prepare aspiring professionals for prototype competition in the WeatherTech SportsCar Championship and offer a challenging environment for mature semi-professional drivers, including competition in a Masters Championship. Equally capable and cost-effective Lites 2 machines offer new competitors a perfect introduction to the world-class competition offered by IMSA.

For more information about Mazda Prototype Lites Presented by Cooper Tires, visit [www.imsa.com](http://www.imsa.com), follow hashtag #MazdaLites @IMSA on Twitter or IMSA on Facebook.

### **About IMSA**

The International Motor Sports Association, LLC (IMSA) was originally founded in 1969 and owns a long and rich history in sports car racing. Today, IMSA is the sanctioning body of the IMSA WeatherTech SportsCar Championship, the premier sports car racing series in North America. IMSA also sanctions the Continental Tire SportsCar Challenge and the Mazda Prototype Lites Presented by Cooper Tires, as well as four single-make series: Porsche GT3 Cup Challenge USA by Yokohama; Ultra 94 Porsche GT3 Cup Challenge Canada by Yokohama; Ferrari Challenge North America; and Lamborghini Super Trofeo North America. IMSA – a company within the NASCAR family – is the exclusive strategic partner in North America with the Automobile Club de l'Ouest (ACO) which operates the 24 Hours of Le Mans as a part of the FIA World Endurance Championship. The partnership enables selected IMSA WeatherTech SportsCar Championship competitors to earn automatic entries into the prestigious 24 Hours of Le Mans. For more information, visit [www.IMSA.com](http://www.IMSA.com), [www.twitter.com/IMSA](https://www.twitter.com/IMSA) or [www.facebook.com/IMSA](https://www.facebook.com/IMSA).



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