

SA DRIVERS QUALIFY FOR FREE STATE 500 AT PHAKISA FREEWAY

The first of two two-day driver training and licence qualification courses for January 31's inaugural Free State 500 at Phakisa Freeway was held at the Welkom circuit on Saturday and Sunday. Five South African drivers successfully completed the California-based Drivetech Training School's preparation for the first NASCAR type American stock car race in South Africa.

A joint initiative of the Free State Government and the American Speed Association (ASA) based in Daytona, Florida, the "Battle Between Two Continents" will see drivers from both countries as well as Australia and Great Britain compete against each other in the ASA Transcontinental version of America's most popular motor racing formula.

The South Africa drivers who attended the first training session were Johan Cronje, FJ Oosthuizen, Lionel Lotter and WesBank V8 racers Jaco and Danie Correia Jr.

Experienced instructor and President of Drivetech Mark Ebert from Tucson, Arizona was impressed with the performance of the South Africans. "I was totally amazed by the unbelievable race craft of the South African drivers. From the very first lap they proved that they are very good at what they do. I could not believe how quickly they adapted to Oval track racing considering that this was the first time they had experienced these cars and the circuit.

Not only did the South Africans impress with their driving abilities, but they all took to the theory lessons without any problems. "American stock cars are heavy and have narrow tyres, little downforce, small brakes and a high centre of gravity - in fact, everything that makes a race car difficult to drive," said Ebert.

"Many drivers cannot adapt to driving these cars fast, which we have seen when top drivers from other disciplines, like Formula 1, have struggled to make the transition. Your guys did great."

American Geoff Bodine, a veteran of 27 years of NASCAR racing and a former winner of the blue-riband Daytona 500, was in South Africa for a few days in December to help promote the race and established a target lap time of 38 seconds for the 2,5-km banked oval. The lap times of the five South Africans ranged between 40,2 and 42 seconds.

"The track is fantastic," enthused Ebert. "There is a slight dip at the entrance to turn 3 which is a little challenging, but it is the same for everybody. The rest of the oval is very smooth and extremely fast."

Ebert and fellow trainer Ritchie Aleman took a few spectators, who each donated R500 to child welfare, for a few laps. One of the enthusiastic passengers remarked that on a scale of 1 to 10 the experience rated 15.

The next racing school takes place on Tuesday and Wednesday. Drivers interested in attending this course with a view to qualifying to race in the Free State 500 should contact Etienne Swanepoel at jim1@mweb.co.za. The American teams are expected in South Africa on January 27. Official practice is on Friday, January 29 with qualifying on Saturday, January 30. The 207-lap 500-km race will be run on Sunday, January 31.

Tickets for the four days of action can be obtained from Computicket outlets countrywide or go to www.computicket.com. Prices range from R20.00 on Thursday to R 330.00 on Sunday. Spectacular discounts for Saturday/Sunday tickets are available. All tickets include a 90 minute Pit Walkabout on all days.

Ends

Issued on behalf of the Free State 500. For further information please contact Charmaine Fortune on 011 462 6243 or visit www.freestate500.com. Pics can be downloaded from www.motorpics.co.za.

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