

Justin Piscitell, of Weston, Conn., starting third in today's Playboy Mazda MX-5 Cup Race at VIR after this morning's qualifying.

DANVILLE, Va. - Brad Rampelberg, of San Jose, Calif., qualified on pole during a wet morning session for the season-opening SCCA Pro Racing Playboy Mazda MX-5 Cup race at VIRginia International Raceway, part of the Bosch Engineering 250 Weekend. AMG teammate Michael Cooper, of Syossett, N.Y., will start alongside Rampelberg on the front row, with Justin Piscitell, of Weston, Conn., starting third.

Following overnight and morning rain storms, each team was forced to decide whether to use the standard BFGoodrich g-Force R1 tire or switch to the rain tire for the drying, but still wet, track. Rampelberg and the AMG team elected to use the BFGoodrich g-Force T/A KDW rain tire on the No. 4 AMG Racing/Mazda/Cobalt Brakes Mazda MX-5, which paid off in the form of the fastest qualifying time of the 30-minute session.

Rampelberg turned a fast time of 2:28.796 (79.115 mph) on his final lap of the session around the 17-turn, 3.27-mile circuit to secure the pole for Sunday afternoon's race.



Brad Rampelberg will start the MX-5 Cup race at VIR on pole.

"It was a wet session that went to dry, and the question was whether to go out on wet tires or dry tires," Rampelberg said. "We tested a couple of weeks ago in the rain like this and ran dry tires, and at the 11th hour decided to put the wet tires on. I have to thank Jason Hoover, AMG and Todd Lamb for making that call for me.

"It looks like the weather forecast is going to be dry, and the sun is coming out right now. We'll put the dry set-up on the car for this afternoon and go racing."

Cooper, making his first career MX-5 Cup start, followed the lead of his experienced teammate and also used the rain tires on his No. 84 AMG Racing/Bromante Landscaping & Design Mazda MX-5 during the session. The rookie, making his sports car racing debut after a season racing in the Skip Barber series, continued to improve his times throughout the session and even overtook Rampelberg at the top of the charts at one point late in the session. Cooper's fast lap of 2:29.189 (78.906 mph) also came on his final lap.

"The rain was a little difficult today," Cooper said. "The track was drying, but we really hoped the rain tires were the better tire. AMG gave me a great car, and the pit crew was awesome here.

"The Bromante Landscaping & Design car was good in the dry; we were third in the first practice. Yesterday, we had a lot of traffic, but the car is great. We can definitely do well in the race. This is my first time here in this car, and I'm looking forward to it."

Team MER's Piscitell was the fastest car to choose the standard dry tire, a move that almost paid off in the No. 89 Team MER/DAMG Worldwide Mazda MX-5 as the session moved along. His lap of 2:29.472 (78.757 mph) left him just 0.676-second behind Rampelberg.

"At MER, we decided we were going to take a gamble and try to go out on the dry tires, hoping it was going to dry up," Piscitell said. "It was getting better every lap, and if we had had another lap or two we might have been able to pick off a pole. Third is good enough, I'm pretty good with it. The car felt good considering it was wet and we were on slicks. I'm happy to see we were the fastest car out there on the dry tires, and we'll see how it goes. I'm pretty confident our dry set-up will be good."

Dean Copeland, Bowie, Md., another driver making his Playboy MX-5 Cup debut this weekend, will start fourth in the No. 7 Copeland Motorsports/Insynch Radios Mazda MX-5 after posting a time of 2:31.135 (77.890 mph).

Ara Malkhassian, of Houston, Texas, was quickest in Saturday's practice and will start fifth in the No. 11 ALARA Racing/Bulldog Productions Mazda MX-5, running a fast time of 2:31.232 (77.840 mph).

Both Copeland and Malkhassian qualified on the standard BFGoodrich g-Force R1.

Lyonel Kent, Mat Pombo, Nick Evans, Mark Carpenter and Harrison Williams start sixth through 10th on the grid.

Teams have a quick turn-around time to set-up their cars for the drying conditions before this afternoon's SCCA Pro Racing Playboy Mazda MX-5 Cup race at 2:45 p.m. (EDT) this afternoon. To follow each session's notes and timing, please visit www.mx-5cup.com.

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