

Another strong MX-5 Cup Weekend for Justin Piscitell at Autobahn

JOLIET, III. - Brad Rampelberg, of San Jose, Calif., became the first driver this season to win back-to-back SCCA Pro Racing Playboy Mazda MX-5 Cup races, sweeping the doubleheader at Autobahn Country Club during the Harrah's Autobahn Grand Prix presented by Mazda. Justin Piscitell, of Weston, Conn., and Michael Cooper, of Syosset, N.Y., finished second and third.

Rampelberg's No. 4 AMG Racing/Mazda/Cobalt Brakes Mazda MX-5 pushed polesitter Nick Evans from the time the lights turned green for the standing start of the 17-lap race. When Evans' No. 28 Team MER/Mazda/Sparco MX-5 ran wide in the last corner of the 19-turn, 3.56-mile track on lap nine, Rampelberg was on the point.



Brad Rampelberg (4) battled for his Sunday win at Autobahn. (Joi Dunn photo)

The two continued to run nose-to-tail in a lead pack breakaway with Piscitell and Cooper until lap 16 when Evans slid off track in Turn 5. The off-course excursion dropped Evans off the pace and gave a Rampelberg breathing room, which he used to earn a 1.237-second victory.

It was the fourth win of the season and the second of the weekend for Rampelberg, who averaged 77.055 mph over the race lasting 47:07.488, covering 60.52 miles.

"Nick was real fast, and I wasn't sure early how I was going to keep a hold of him," Rampelberg said. "My plan was to see where he was good in the first half of the race and if he made a mistake, try to capitalize on it. I wanted to keep the pressure up, and he made a couple of little mistakes where I wasn't able to get it done. Finally, I was able to get past him.

"The difference between today's car and yesterday's car was incredible. Yesterday, we weren't the best car and still got the win. Today, I think we were. Jason Hoover and Jim Bell worked their tails off, and AMG had the best car at Autobahn this weekend."

Capitalizing on his teammates' mistake, Piscitell drove the No. 89 Team MER/DAMG Worldwide/Merchant Services MX-5 to his second podium of the weekend. Piscitell started third and held the position through the majority of the race, keeping pace with Evans and Rampelberg but unable to find a clean way around the leaders.

The runner-up position was valuable for Piscitell, who keeps the Championship lead through eight of 11 races.

"The start of the race was exciting," Piscitell said. "I almost had contact with Brad, which led to some contact with Cooper and got me nice and sideways. I gathered it up and put my head down to chase Nick and Brad. Once Brad got past Nick, he didn't make any mistakes. It's a very hard track to pass on, and the cars got better from yesterday. It was a good weekend for Team MER, though, and we'll see how we do at Mosport in just a couple of weeks."

For Cooper, the podium finish was his third in four races in just his full season driving a race car of any kind. Cooper matched the pace of the leaders, turning the fastest lap of the race in the No. 84 AMG Racing/Bromante Landscaping & Design MX-5 with a best time of 2:44.995 (77.675 mph) to establish a new in-race record for Autobahn Country Club. Nevertheless, Cooper ran at the back of the four-car breakaway until earning the promotion into third after Evans' mistake.

"AMG and Jim Bell Engineering gave Brad and I both great cars," Cooper said. "In the beginning I was hanging back, and in the middle I made a mistake, fell back and had to catch back up. When Nick went off, he gave me third. We're in a pretty good position with the championship still. It's my first year at this, so I'm still learning, but we're still in position."

Evans held on to finish fourth in a car that had begun to fade even before his mishap.

Comfortably behind the leaders throughout the race was a seven-car pack that spent the race battling for fifth. Jesse Combs' No. 77 ALARA Racing/Coolgas.com MX-5 started fifth, but fell back to eighth during the first lap when Mark Carpenter's No. 14 AMG Racing/GGS Technical Publications MX-5 led three cars past Combs.

On lap five, an ALARA Racing train headed by Lyonel Kent's No. 13 ALARA Racing/Bulldog Productions MX-5 and including Combs and the No. 11 ALARA Racing/Bulldog Productions MX-5 of Ara Malkhassian dropped Carpenter to eighth. Combs took another turn at the front of that pack on lap 11, before Carpenter grabbed fifth position for good on lap 12.

Kent and Combs held on for sixth and seventh position.

Eighth and ninth positions were filled by a pair of drivers local to Autobahn Country Club. Club members Dan Bender, in the No. 18 Team MER/Autobahn Mazda Countryside MX-5, and Joel Weinberger, in the No. 66

ALARA/Continental Mazda of Naperville MX-5, finished eighth and ninth during the race. Both used local knowledge of the track to earn successful finishes in their only appearances with the MX-5 Cup this season.

Malkhassian, who ran in that second train for most of the race, completed the top 10.

With three rounds remaining, Piscitell stretched his lead in the Drivers' Championship by three points over Cooper to a seven-point advantage, 433-426. Rampelberg's win shrunk his deficit to 12 with 421 points, followed by Combs (368) and Evans (362).

The SCCA Pro Racing Playboy Mazda MX-5 Cup returns to action north of the border at Mosport International Raceway in Bowmanville, Ontario, Aug. 27-19. To follow each session's notes and timing, please visit www.mx-5cup.com.

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