

Justin Piscitell Earns First MX-5 Cup Win, Regains Championship Lead

MILLVILLE, N.J. -

Justin Piscitell, of Weston, Conn., had run 14 SCCA Pro Racing Playboy Mazda MX-5 Cup races in his career dating back to last season, 11 of those a top four or better. On Saturday afternoon at New Jersey Motorsports Park, Piscitell finally stood on the top spot of the podium, earning his first career MX-5 Cup win at the Mazda Motorsports Festival presented by VISITFLORIDA.com and reclaiming the championship lead. Michael Cooper, of Syosset, N.Y., and Lyonel Kent, of Knoxville, Tenn., completed the podium. Though Piscitell's final margin of victory was 3.175 seconds in the 27-lap, 58.59-mile race that averaged 75.860 mph, the 21-year-old driver's first win was anything but easy in the No. 89 Team MER/DAMG Worldwide Mazda MX-5.

Piscitell began the race in third, and by lap five was running nose-to-tail for the lead with Brad Rampelberg in the No. 4 AMG Racing/Mazda/Cobalt Brakes MX-5. Rampelberg led laps one through six, but Piscitell made a pass for the lead going into turn one on lap seven.



Piscitell earned his first-career win at New Jersey.

Using the draft of the lead car down the long front straight, the pair swapped the lead numerous times on the entrance to turn one. Rampelberg regained the point on lap nine, Piscitell used the same move on lap 10 to take control, and Rampelberg moved back to the lead on lap 12.

A full-course caution bunched the field on lap 13 to pull Kristine Craine's No. 39 Pinktop Racing/Racing For The Cure Mazda MX-5 out of the gravel trap outside of turn one, and Rampelberg again led the field away from the green flag on lap 16.

As Piscitell again used the draft to get a run on Rampelberg down the front straight, the pair went side-by-side across the finish line to begin lap 17. That draft let Cooper, in the No. 84 AMG Racing/Bromante Landscaping & Design MX-5, run three wide going into turn one and take his turn at the front of the field for one lap before Piscitell again returned the favor.

Rampelberg's day ended on lap 19, when coolant leaking from his radiator leaked onto his tires and he slid wide under braking at turn five. That radiator ended Rampelberg's day one lap later when he was forced to park his car for an 18th place finish.

With Rampelberg out of the way, Piscitell and Cooper were set-up for a showdown to the finish. Cooper, again in turn one, took the lead on lap 19 and led for the next three laps, with Piscitell moving in front on lap 22.

From there, the pair worked together to pull a gap on the rest of the field until two laps were left in the race. On the penultimate lap, Cooper slid inside Piscitell for lead at turn one, but lost the advantage again at turn 11.

Using a defensive line on the final lap, Piscitell protected the inside line and sent Cooper to the outside to set up the more difficult move. The duo ran side-by-side through turn two. With one last effort, Cooper slid wide in turn three and Piscitell rushed to the checkered flag.

"I don't know how to explain it, there's nothing like the first one," Piscitell said. "It was just awesome. I ran hard the whole race, and tried to keep it clean. I was hoping to check out with Brad in the first half of the race, and then the caution came out. There's nothing like the first time you do something, and, wow, I know I'm going to sleep good tonight. I was working hard, and it's hot out there.

"I love this track. It's got a great rhythm to it, and I have to thank VISITFLORIDA.com for holding this event at New Jersey Motorsports Park. I'm so stoked to be here."

Officially, there were 10 lead changes among four different drivers. Piscitell also turned the race's fastest lap in 1:35.712 (81.619 mph).

Cooper's runner-up finish is his best in his rookie season as a professional racer. The young driver showed a veteran poise through the late stages of the race, admitting post-race that he let Piscitell by him on lap 26 to make a run at a race-winning turn one pass on the white flag lap.

"From everything that I saw when I was in third place before the caution, everything was happening in turn one," Cooper said. "My guys were on the radio with a few laps to go telling me 'pass him, pass him', and I thought it was too early. I passed him and thought it wasn't going to work. I made it look like I pushed through eight and tossed it back over to the right and basically parked it. So we battled it out through one and two, and that didn't help me. Going into the chicane, I got all kinds of out of shape and had to just hold on to second at that point."

Kent held off three ALARA Racing teammates for his third-place finish in the No. 13 ALARA Racing/Bulldog Productions Mazda MX-5. It was Kent's first podium finish since his Round Two win at Road Atlanta, made even more improbable by the fact that he destroyed his car on the final lap of the race just six days ago at Road America.

After some long travel days, Kent purchased another Mazda MX-5 Cup car and had it in New Jersey in time for this weekend's race.

"It was a good day for the ALARA Racing/Bulldog Productions car," Kent said. "It was such a challenge just getting here. It's great to get another car just a week after the accident at Road America. I'm just thrilled to be here on the podium at New Jersey Motorsports Park. It's a thrill a minute.

"My car was severely damaged, thank goodness these Mazdas are safe and I could walk away without a scratch. We drove straight back to Knoxville after the race, about 13 hours. Tuesday evening I got a call saying there was a car waiting in Atlanta for me if I wanted to pick it up and could get it here. I woke up at 4 a.m. and headed to Atlanta, about four hours, picked up the car and drove about 14 hours here to New Jersey. We got in just after midnight on Wednesday, sorted the car on Thursday and Friday and we're on the podium today."

Polesitter Jesse Combs, in the No. 77 ALARA Racing/Coolgas.com MX-5, and Ara Malkhassian, in the No. 11 ALARA Racing/Bulldog Productions MX-5, followed Kent to the line to complete the top five. Combs battled in the lead pack throughout the early stages of the race before settling in and consistently running near the front all race.

Mark Carpenter, who started seventh in the No. 14 AMG Racing/GGS Technical Publications MX-5, finished sixth.

Making just his second MX-5 Cup start, Amber, Pa.-resident John Tancredi (No. 63 DILYSI Racing MX-5) improved seven positions from his spot on the starting grid to finish seventh at his home track. Virginia International Raceway runner-up Dean Copeland (No. 7 Copeland Motorsports/Synch Radios), Alfred Caiola (No. 09 AMG Racing/B&L Management), and Jeff Mosing (No. 30 Team MER/Frank's Internaitonal/RaceNowForAutism) completed the top ten.

With the win, Piscitell regains the Championship lead by 14 points over Cooper, 271 – 257. Rampelberg, who entered the race tied with Piscitell for the point lead, has fallen to third with 237 points after his mechanical difficulties. Combs (234 points) and Malkhassian (210) currently sit in the top five.

The SCCA Pro Racing Playboy Mazda MX-5 Cup races again on Sunday afternoon at 1:05 p.m. (EDT). The race will be televised live on HDNet.

To follow each session's notes and timing, please visit www.mx-5cup.com.

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