

Justin Piscitell finished fourth at VIR in closest Playboy Mazda MX-5 Cup race history.

DANVILLE, Va. - Brad Rampelberg, of San Jose, Calif., edged Dean Copeland, of Bowie, Md., by just 0.024-second at VIRginia International Raceway in the closest SCCA Pro Racing Playboy Mazda MX-5 Cup race in the history of the series. Michael Cooper, of Syosset, N.Y., finished third.

Rampelberg started the race from the pole in the No. 4 AMG Racing/Mazda/Cobalt Brakes Mazda MX-5, and held the lead through the first of 20 laps in the 45-minute timed race. With a 1.109-second lead after one lap and still holding a 1.084-second lead after three laps, Rampelberg seemingly was cruising to a win.



Brad Rampelberg won at VIR in the closest race in MX-5 Cup history.

The fourth lap changed everything, as a big run from Copeland in the No. 7 Copeland Motorsports/Insynch Radios Mazda MX-5 down the front straight to start the lap gave him the lead for the first time. Mat Pombo, the No. 84 AMG Racing/Bromante Landscaping & Design Mazda MX-5 of Cooper, Justin Piscitell and Nick Evans joined the two battling for the lead in a six-car breakaway from the rest of the field.

Copeland and Rampelberg would swap the lead virtually every lap with the other four cars in tow until Lap 17, when Pombo slid off-course in the No. 01 PFM Pombo Racing/Range of Motion ATL/Carbotech Mazda MX-5 at turn 17. The off-course excursion pulled the No. 01 machine's rear bumper cover loose and shrunk the lead pack to five cars.

The lead pair continued to swap the point until crossing the stripe to begin lap 18, when Rampelberg led by 0.299-second. Rampelberg held the lead for the next two laps until the field was given the white flag to begin the final tour around the 17-turn, 3.27-mile circuit.

Copeland had one final charge remaining, and slipped past Rampelberg on the back straight entering turn 14. A bobble through the turn 17 and 17a complex allowed Rampelberg to pull alongside Copeland and the drag race was on down the front straight.

At the finish line, Rampelberg edged the nose of his machine just ahead of Copeland for the win, the closest finish in MX-5 Cup history. The previous closest margin of victory was a 0.090-second win for Todd Buras over Payton Wilson at Mosport International Raceway in 2006.

It was Rampelberg's third career MX-5 Cup victory, and first since Miller Motorsports Park in 2008.

"Dean was better through Oak Tree coming onto the back straight," Rampelberg said. "I felt like I was a little better on the last turn. I thought if I could get a good run on the white flag lap coming out of Oak Tree, I could hold him off. That was my only goal on that lap. When he came out of there right on my bumper, I thought it was over. He passed me and I got on the radio and told my guys we lost the race. Then I thought to myself, I've got one more shot at this, laid back going through Hog Pen [turn 17] and rolled right through onto the front straight.

"Dean raced me so clean. He could have driven me off on the outside of the track and he didn't. It was a hard race, we probably passed twice a lap for 10 laps and never touched. It was a great race."

Though Copeland finished second in his professional debut, it was a bittersweet way to end the weekend.

"Me and Brad were really duking it out back there," Copeland said. "I was a little better through the Oak Tree turn and was able to get a run on him down the back straight. It was really just a dog fight up until the two thousandths of a second finish.

"It's really great being able to run with the big dogs the first time out. They've got big teams, and it's really just me and my dad out here doing it with heart. Although I'm upset I ended up second in so close of a finish, I'm really happy with it given the circumstances. I'm just ready to get back at it and next time, hopefully, the luck will be on my end."

Officially, there were 10 lead changes in the 20-lap, caution-free race, which covered 65.4 miles in 45:41.207 for an average speed of 85.899 mph.

Cooper spent his race just behind the lead battle, but fighting off challenges from the rest of the lead group. After sneaking into second for lap three, Cooper fell back to fourth for several laps before settling into third position on lap seven.

Despite several challenges from Piscitell in the No. 89 Team MER/DAMG Worldwide Mazda MX-5, Cooper held on to join his AMG teammate on the podium.

"It was definitely a good weekend to start my pro career," Cooper said. "AMG gave Brad and me amazing cars for the race and qualifying. We had the right strategy and it got us up front for the race. Most of the time I was in third, but everyone was racing clean. It was a good race."

Piscitell, of Weston, Conn., finished fourth, with Nick Evans, of Powell, Ohio, fifth in the No. 28 Team MER/Mazda/Sparco Mazda MX-5.

After falling back to seventh for a brief moment following his off-course incident, Pombo made up a position on the final lap to finish sixth. Pombo's second lap of 2:15.306 (87.002 mph) was the fastest of the race.

Jesse Combs finished seventh in the No. 77 coolgas.com Mazda MX-5 after also slipping past Mark Carpenter, driving the No. 14 AMG Racing/GGS Technical Publications Mazda MX-5 on the final lap. Carpenter would finish eighth.

Jeff Mosing finished ninth in the No. 30 Team MER/RaceNowForAutism/Franks' Int Mazda MX-5. Brian Audet completed the top-10 in the No. 35 Urban East Racing/Audet Construction Mazda MX-5, coming from the rear of the 19-car field after his qualifying times were disallowed for returning to his paddock behind the pit wall without permission from race officials.

The SCCA Pro Racing Playboy Mazda MX-5 Cup returns to action in less than one week, racing at Road Atlanta April 30 - May 1.

To view television times for this race, visit www.mx-5cup.com.

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