

Justin to start Piscitell third at New Jersey Motorsports Park

Jesse Combs, of Houston, Texas, had never seen New Jersey Motorsports Park before he arrived on Thursday for the Mazda Motorsports Festival presented by VISITFLORIDA.com. After this morning's qualifying session, he'll start Saturday afternoon's SCCA Pro Racing Playboy Mazda MX-5 Cup race from pole position.

Combs turned a lap of 1:34.470 (82.693 mph) on his second flying lap of the 30-minute morning session, and watched the time charts as the field tried to best the lap. At the finish of the session, Combs' No. 77 ALARA Racing/Coolgas.com Mazda MX-5 was still atop the session, just 0.060-second ahead of Brad Rampelberg.



Jesse Combs earned his first MX-5 Cup pole at New Jersey.

"I have to thank ALARA Racing and my crew chief Ken Murillo for this," Combs said. "I've never been to this track before, and we worked on set-up and it looks like this morning it worked out. The car is great, it's so much fun to drive. This series has to be the best series there is. I'm happy to be here and on pole."

"If you look at this series, statistically, it's really tough to win outside the first couple of rows. I'm excited about that, and I'm hoping my teammates Lyonel [Kent] and Ara [Malkhassian] can get up and run with me, and hopefully it'll be an ALARA podium today."

Rampelberg shares the Championship lead with Justin Piscitell – now at 210 points after each earned a point for qualifying in the top-five – and will start alongside Combs on the front row of the afternoon race. Rampelberg turned a lap of 1:34.530 (82.640 mph) late in the session in the No. 4 AMG Racing/Mazda/Cobalt Brakes MX-5. After setting an early lap, Rampelberg and his AMG teammates Michael Cooper and Mark Carpenter pulled into pit lane for the middle 10 minutes of the session to cool tires and take another run at pole.

The best he could manage was second, but the San Jose, Calif.-racer is happy with the front row start.

"Our car is really good," Rampelberg said. "This is a low-grip track, so we really wanted to work on making car handle. We through a bunch of changes at it for qualifying, and the car is really good. Again, a little bit of draft goes a long way. It's a team game right now, and we're trying to make the car handle. Hopefully we can make the car work for 45-minutes and bring home a winner."

Piscitell, of Weston, Conn., is 0.137-second behind the pole and will start third. Like Rampelberg, Piscitell laid down a fast lap early in the session in his No. 89 Team MER/DAMG Worldwide MX-5, and improved to 1:34.607 (82.573 mph) on his last lap of the session.

"The DAMG/MER Mazda MX-5 was really good," Piscitell said. "We went out and had a really good drafting strategy, and it worked really well in the first two laps. Then everyone else figured it out, too, and did the same thing. We let our tires cool, and then went out and tried it again. The good thing was that we saw our cars and my teammates were consistent in the whole session. Nick [Evans] is a few positions behind me [starting sixth], so hopefully he can get to me and we can work together."

Two drivers posted identical times for the fourth best in the session at 1:34.671 (82.517 mph). Combs' ALARA Racing teammate, Lyonel Kent, driving the No. 13 ALARA Racing Bulldog Productions MX-5, and Michael Cooper, in the No. 84 AMG Racing/Bromante Landscaping & Design MX-5, each turned identical times in the session.

By the rulebook, Kent will start fourth, ahead of Cooper, based on their second-best times of the session. Kent's second fastest time was a 1:34.678, while Cooper only turned a 1:34.839.

The SCCA Pro Racing Playboy Mazda MX-5 Cup takes the green flag on Saturday 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.

Follow the SCCA Pro Racing Playboy Mazda MX-5 Cup on Twitter @ MazdaMX5Cup