

MAZDASPEED Shootout Winners On Path To MX-5 Cup Championship

TOPEKA, Kan. - Over the years, Mazda has put an extraordinary amount of time and resources into assembling a ladder of developmental series aimed at advancing drivers to the top of the motorsports food chain (and, for good measure, Mazda also has championship-winning programs at the top level). As the company is fond of saying, on any given weekend there are more Mazdas being raced than any other manufacturer.

It's not just about quantity, though, it's about quality, as proven in Mazda's commitment to moving amateur racers into the professional ranks. Each year, the company hosts its championship-winning Mazda drivers from the amateur ranks, including the SCCA National Championship Runoffs®, for the MAZDASPEED Driver Development Ladder Shootout. The winner, selected by a panel of distinguished judges, earns a full-season ride in the SCCA Pro Racing Playboy Mazda MX-5 Cup.



Nick Evans, Brad Rampelberg and Justin Piscitell (L-R) are all MAZDASPEED Shootout winners running in the MX-5 Cup Series this season.

How successful is the program? That's an easy answer, if you look at this year's MX-5 Cup.

2007 winner Brad Rampelberg, 2008 selection Justin Piscitell, and most-recent recipient Nick Evans are all running at the front in 2010. Each came to their success in very different ways, but they have at least two things in common – their professional racing aspirations got a boost by winning the shootout, and they each can drive a race car very, very fast.

"Not being able to self-fund, I needed some way to get to the pro level," Rampelberg said of his initial foray into the MX-5 Cup in 2008 after becoming the 2007 SCCA Spec Miata National Champion. "I think as you do a good job, teams look at you and want to add you to their roster. But, it takes a certain level of funding. I think it's a tough call whether I would have been able to make it on my own without Mazda's funding."

Rampelberg finished sixth in the Drivers' Championship in his inaugural campaign, and has returned this year after a year off with more experience and a knowledge of his AMG team that has proven invaluable. In short, all of the ingredients that a driver need to compete for a championship. The 41-year-old doesn't shy away from that pressure.

"My team AMG – Atlanta Motorsports Group – is, in my biased opinion, the best team out here," he said. "I've got a good team. I've got a good car. This is my second year in the series. So, I feel like I've got the right tools. I need a little bit of luck and a little bit of hard work."

The shootout judges aren't looking for the most experienced driver, or even the quickest. The goal is to find the complete package, in a driver that has real potential down the road. That's what happened in 2008, when the judges selected a young driver who had less than a year in a race car and had only competed in Skip Barber MX-5 regional series before the shootout.

Piscitell didn't let them down, finishing second in the MX-5 Cup in 2009 and leading the championship through eight of 11 rounds in 2010. He also managed to break through for his first professional win this season at New Jersey Motorsports Park.

In more ways than one, the shootout was the now 21-year-old's first taste of what professional racing really is.

"It was exciting because I had never experienced anything like it before," Piscitell said. "I had never had camera put in my face before in my life. I had never sat in a car that had a set of race tires on it

before. I had no media training. I was not at a college yet. I had no idea what any of it [the Mazda shootout] was until I found out I was eligible to go to it."

What it became for Piscitell was a road map on how to advance a career he didn't even know he wanted until about a year earlier. Unlike many young racers these days, he didn't grow up in the sport. After a speeding ticket that nearly cost him his driver's license, his father not-so-subtly suggested they both take a High Performance Driving School at Skip Barber.

Following another similar school experience, instructors suggested he take a racing school, followed by another instructor suggesting he enter a race. In just his third time on a racetrack, Piscitell won a beginner's race in the school's formula cars. From there, it was off to win a battle by less than five points with current MX-5 Cup competitor Lyonel Kent in the Skip Barber MX-5 series.

That crash course in racing helped, without a doubt. But it was just the tip of the iceberg, as he quickly found.

"That was all on street tires," Piscitell recalled of his prior successes. "I had never been on a race tire yet. I had no idea what it would feel like. I had never been in a car that wasn't on a street suspension. So, then when I went to the shootout, it was like, I don't know what a race tire is going to feel like. I don't know what a stiff suspension is going to be like. I don't know what an adjustment is going to be like because you are not allowed to make any adjustments to the car in Skip Barber. I had never played with a shock in my life."

The rest, as they say, is history.

"[The shootout] was the start of my career," Piscitell said. "It gave me a path to follow. It gave me a set of goals. My goal now is to follow the rest of the ladder. I would still be trying to figure out if I should run Skip Barber or if I should go do Club Racing or if I should stop racing. This gave me a set of goals to set my eyes on and something to pursue."

Evans was following the more traditional path for young racers, but was approaching a crossroads in his career. A student at The Ohio State University, Evans had been racing Formula Enterprises and Spec Racer Ford in SCCA Club Racing, capturing the FE National Championship at Road America to gain eligibility to the shootout.

From there, the soft-spoken driver faced the same whirlwind of events that the others faced – with, again, an added challenge of writing a business plan for gaining sponsorship and keeping his career alive past the first season.

"It was a bit stressful at times," Evans said. "It was definitely difficult. I didn't necessarily have a bunch of experience on the business side of things. But, I knew how to drive a racecar. It was a real challenge to build a business proposal and have it critiqued by all of these really famous people from the racing industry. Once I got out to Buttonwillow, it was a lot easier because I got to drive a car. But then they put me on the spot and had me do a presentation, which was very challenging."

The beginning of the 2010 season was an adjustment, not only to the differences in a professional series but to racing a front-engine car for the first time in his career. Evans' natural abilities have begun to shine, however, as in the past five races he's earned a runner-up finish, a pair of thirds and a fourth. He also led laps in each of those four, with only mechanical difficulties preventing five-consecutive high finishes.

"The biggest difference is just the atmosphere," Evans said. "Everybody is here. There are a lot of spectators. There's a lot of focus on you. The pressure level is different. I think, in terms of competition, everybody still wants to win. You really don't think about the spectators on the track or anything like that. But, just walking around the paddock is a different experience. You actually have fans there, whereas, in a Club race, it's pretty much just you and your competitors."

All three agree that the shootout process was a stressful event that gave each of their careers a boost.

“What were the odds of Nicks Evans, Brad and I being seen if there was no ladder?” Piscitell said. “We’d still be trying to scrounge up money to race and Mazda gives you a year to make something happen. There is no other car manufacturer out there that offers any form of support like that.”

With three races to go in the 2010 season, Piscitell leads the MX-5 Cup Championship, with Rampelberg (who has four wins) and Evans third and fifth, respectively.

With three championship contenders, the only thing left is to see which driver stands tallest at the end of the season – and where a boost from the MAZDASPEED Driver Development Ladder Shootout lets three promising drivers grow their road racing careers.

The SCCA Pro Racing Playboy Mazda MX-5 Cup concludes with a race at Mosport International Raceway, August 27-29, and a doubleheader at Miller Motorsports Park, Sept. 10-12.