

Justin takes over 1st place in overall points standing after finishing P3 at Mazda Raceway

In an exciting race that saw the leader go off track on the last lap and the eventual winner being severely penalized for dangerous driving Justin finished P3 and moved into 1st place in the Playboy Mx-5 Cup series.

Starting in 4th position Justin was forced back to 8th on the first turn of the race and had to fight his way back until eventually gaining control of 3rd on the last lap of the race.

MONTEREY, Calif. - Mat Pombo, of Atlanta, earned a well-fought, first-career win in Sunday's SCCA Pro Racing Playboy MX-5 Cup Round Three race at Mazda Raceway Laguna Seca, part of the American Le Mans Series Monterey Weekend. Ara Malkhassian, of Houston, Texas, finished second.

Pombo started from the pole in the No. 01 PFM Pombo Racing/Range of Motion ATL/Carbotech MX-5. He led the first two laps of the 26-lap race before Brad Rampelberg, of San Jose, Calif., took the lead on lap three in the No. 4. AMG/Mazda/Colbalt Brakes MX-5.

From this point, it was a back-and-forth battle between Pombo and Rampelberg. They swapped the top spot six times throughout the race. In fact, on lap 22, Rampelberg had a narrow 0.001-second lead over Pombo - a virtual dead-even race at the start finish line.



Pombo leads Rampelberg and Malkhassian en route to his first-career MX-5 Cup win.

Heading into the last lap, Rampelberg's lead was nearly half a second over Pombo. Rampelberg looked poised to capture his second win of the season or, at worst, record his third consecutive podium. However, coming out of Turn Nine into Turn 10, Rampelberg and Pombo came up on lapped traffic. Rampelberg was forced to check up and that's when Pombo got into the back of Rampelberg. The result sent Rampelberg into the Turn 10 gravel, while Pombo continued on to capture his first-career MX-5 Cup win by 1.072-seconds over Malkhassian.

"We were just biding our time," Pombo said of his battle with Rampelberg. "Ara was coming. I told Brad [Rampelberg] let's just stay in line and we did that. We each made a couple of mistakes and we graciously let each other by.

"On the last lap, we ran up on a lapped car coming through the corkscrew and I got a great run coming down inside of him [Rampelberg]. I thought he was going to leave me some room on the inside. I was probably up to his mirror and I just ran out of room on the inside. I was off the track on the concrete coming down the hill and he came for the apex and my nose was there.

"I feel for Brad. He is a good friend of mine. I know he's mad. I would be also. That was just some bad racing luck. It was two cars in the same spot, at the same time and nobody wanted to give."

Rampelberg, who was the Championship point leader heading into Round Three, could have taken a commanding lead with a win or a podium finish. But, as a result of the contact, he finished 17th and drop two spots in the Championship.

"Mat's a friend of mine," Rampelberg said. "We run Spec Miata together a lot and he's my doctor. He's an orthopedic surgeon. I actually got a grade two/grade three shoulder separation of Friday afternoon. He diagnosed it and he's kind of helped me all weekend. I thought it would be fitting for he and I to be on the podium. When he and I were racing together, it was awesome. It was fun, real clean racing.

"We came up to the corkscrew and we came up on lapped traffic. The blue flags were waving. She [Kristine Cane] came down out of the corkscrew and set up into [Turn] Nine. I thought she was going to let us by on the inside. So, I went to the inside. She came down on us and I had to check up. Mat had to check up and he got into the back of me. It's a bummer. You don't like to finish that way. But, you do this sport long enough, you'll see just about everything. You just hope it's not you."

Malkhassian started sixth in the No. 11 ALARA RACING/Bulldog Productions MX-5 and drove a smart-consistent race. By lap 14, he was third and had the bird's-eye view on the battle in front of him between Rampelberg and Pombo. Malkhassian was positioned just close enough behind the leaders to take advantage of any mishaps between the leaders, but just far enough behind not to get caught up in something. On the final lap, Malkhassian took advantage of Rampelberg's off-track excursion and finished a season-best second.

"ALARA Racing gave us a great set up and handling car," Malkhassian said. "We worked our way up to the front. We made some good passes and we were opportunistic. We did what we had to do. And, the last spot we picked [second place] up was a gift.

Although he finished third, Justin Piscitell, of Weston, Conn., got off to a rough start in the No. 89 Team MER/DAMG Worldwide MX-5. At the race start, Piscitell, who started fourth, had to avoid some contact and the result sent him back to eighth. From there, he immediately put his head down and went to work. Three laps later, he regained all of the positions he had lost. He spent much of the race in fourth. He climbed as high as third and fell to a low sixth. But, each time he battled back. In the end, Piscitell recorded his first podium finish of the season.

"The car in front of me missed a shift at the start," Piscitell said. "I did not want to get in trouble for intentional contact, so I lifted. Ara [Malkhassian] went by me and so did a few other guys. I put my head down and worked my way back through the pack.

"Jesse [Combs] and I had a great race going back-and-forth. We couldn't seem to stay one behind the other long enough to catch the lead crowd. But, we had a good fight. At the end, I guess Rampelberg went off and we ended up on the podium."

Combs, of Houston, Texas, finished a season-best fourth in the No. 77 ALARA RACING/Coolgas.com MX-5 Cup, while Lyonel Kent, of Knoxville, Tenn., finished fifth in the No. 13 ALARA RACING/Bulldog Productions MX-5. Kent also set the fastest race lap with a 1:42.789 (78.382 mph).

With the help of his third place finish, Piscitell takes over the MX-5 Cup Championship point lead with 158 points, followed by Michael Cooper with 150, Rampelberg with 147, Nick Evans with 139 and Pombo with 137 points. Despite the win, Pombo was penalized 30 Championship points and placed on a three race probation for contact with the No. 4 car.