

Playboy Mazda MX-5 Cup Waves Green Flag on 2010 at VIR

ALTON, Va. - In 2009, AMG racing and Todd Lamb captured an MX-5 Cup-record eight races and knocked off Team MER's streak of three-consecutive series champions in dominating fashion. Lamb is gone in 2010, having already finished on the podium in a Mazda RX-8 in Grand-Am Rolex competition, but AMG has a two-car effort at VIRginia International Raceway with an eye on another successful season.

Hoping to pick off where Lamb left off are Brad Rampelberg and Michael Vitarelli. Rampelberg, who will drive the No. 4 AMG/Mazda MX-5, is a Mazda ladder program veteran. The 2007 SCCA National Championship Runoffs winner in the Spec Miata class earned an MX-5 Cup ride in 2008 by winning the MAZDASPEED Driver Development Ladder Shootout. After just a sixth place finish in 2008 and a handful of 2009 starts, Rampelberg has an eye on the championship in 2010.

Vitarelli's best finish in 2009 came as a 13th place effort at VIR. With six MX-5 Cup events now under his belt, the Staten Island-native has his goals higher up the results list in the No. 68 AMG MX-5.



Ara Malkhassian (at Autobahn in 2009) and the MX-5 Cup field returns to action this weekend at VIR.

Perennial title contender Team MER has not one, but two MAZDASPEED Shootout drivers on their side for 2010. Twenty-year-old Justin Piscitell was the 2009 series runner-up to Lamb, finishing a season-best second at VIR a season ago. The 2008 Shootout winner is among the favorites for the 2010 MX-5 Cup crown behind the wheel of his No. 89 Team MER/DAMG Worldwide MX-5.

2009 Shootout winner Nick Evans, driving the No. 28 Mazda/Team MER/Sparco MX-5, is also a threat from the start of the season. The reigning SCCA Runoffs National Champion in Formula Enterprises earned the ride after being selected from 13 finalists for the award.

The Shootout winners will be joined in the Team MER stable by veteran Jeff Mosing in the No. 30 Team MER MX-5 and David Walker in the No. 29 Team MER MX-5. Both are looking for their first MX-5 Cup wins this weekend at VIR.

There is plenty more driver talent on display this weekend at VIR.

Ara Malkhassian, driving the No. 11 ALARA Racing MX-5, is a series veteran who has scored more top-10 finishes (24) than any other driver. He'll be joined by series-veteran Harrison Williams in the No. 00 ALARA Racing/Albrecht & Associates MX-5.

Dean Copeland earned a top-10 last year at VIR in one of just four starts he made in the series. The Spec Miata club racer was a WKA Roadracing champion before getting behind the wheel of the No. 7 Copeland Racing MX-5.

Another driver who earned his best finish at VIR a season ago is Alfred Caiola, who ran ninth on the Alton, Va., track a season ago. Caiola returns in the No. 75 B&L Management MX-5.

SCCA Club racer Richard Watson is trying his hand at SCCA Pro Racing for the first time in 2010, driving the No. 6 BERG Racing MX-5. A regular in 2007, Jesse Combs is also entered at VIR in the No. 77 coolgas.com MX-5. Veteran road racer Jimmy Burke makes the move to the MX-5 Cup Series in the No. 23 PFM Engineering/Carbotech MX-5.

Brian Audet is the lone Virginian in the field at VIR, where the 21-year-old will drive the No. 35 Urban East Racing MX-5.

The beauty of running a spec-series is that driver talent really has a chance to shine through. In MX-5 Cup, however, the additional alluring aspect is the car; the nimble, dependable and undeniably fun Mazda MX-5.

Mechanically, all MX-5 Cup cars will remain essentially stock, as delivered from the dealer, with only bolt-on modifications to the intake and exhaust systems. While the stock MX-5 Miata produces 170 hp, an MX-5 Cup car will produce in excess of 200 hp. All MX-5 Cup vehicles will be equipped with a six-speed manual transmission and may be run with the optionally available limited-slip rear differential.

Suspension will incorporate a fully-adjustable coil-over kit with double-adjustable shock absorbers and specified spring rates, as well as adjustable anti-roll bars front and rear. All cars will run a 17x8" wheel of a specified weight - again, to level the field and minimize costs, as well as the spec BFGoodrich g-Force R1 Tire. Additionally, brake pads, fluid and lines will be upgraded to racing components.

All MX-5 Cup cars will run with full safety equipment, including an eight-point roll-cage welded into the car, a racing seat, racing seatbelts and will incorporate a fire-extinguishing system.

As always, all components for the cars will be sold directly through MAZDASPEED Motorsports Development, which also supports the program monetarily with contingency awards to successful drivers.

Event/Circuit: VIRginia International Raceway; 17-turn, 3.27-mile road course

Qualifying: Sunday, April 25, at 8:45 a.m. (EDT)

Green Flag: Sunday, April 25, at 2:45 p.m. (EDT)

Race Length: 45-minute timed race.