

we're proud to be a part of helping him achieve that goal."

Cup ride genesis

At the annual SCCA Runoffs, the best amateur road racers in the country gather to race for honor and trophies. There is no prize money, except the continuing agency awards made by car companies, tire suppliers,

oil companies and other racing-specific companies. For most, club racing is their total involvement in the sport — many compete there for years with family teams. For a few, it's a training ground as they prepare to race on the professional side.

At the end of the 2005 season of competition, a casual conversation between Sanders and Prill led to a unique competition, a way to help propel a would-be racer from the grassroots ranks to the professional category. While the SCCA Pro Racing SPEED World Challenge is a great series, it is simply too tall of a first step for most club racers. With the inaugural SCCA Pro Racing SIRIUS Satellite Radio Mazda MX-5 Cup Presented by Hankook, there would now be an ideal entry point in the world of professional sports cars — a closed-wheel counterpart to the successful Star Mazda formula car series.

The competition would be open to anyone who won a National Championship at the 2006 SCCA Runoffs, provided they were in a Mazda car, or Mazda-powered car. This meant that 169 drivers from the 700-plus entries would be eligible. After three days of racing, four of the 25 class champions were Mazda powered, more than any other brand. These four drivers were then invited to submit proposals to Mazda. The winner would be given the keys to a new Mazda MX-5 to compete in the 2007 MX-5 Cup series.

In addition to the car, Mazda would also give the winner a few "optional" accessories, like a special racing suspension, cold air intake, exhaust header and system, and a very large box of

MAZDASPEED parts with which to turn the street car into a racecar. SCCA Pro Racing offered to waive the entry fees for the entire 2007

season, and Hankook offered a set of tires for each of the eight races, bringing the total value of the prize to well over \$50,000.



Andrew Caddell won the 2006 Spec Miata title at the Runoffs.

The shootout

Three drivers, six judges and a few Mazda staffers gath-

ered up on a cold January morning at Buttonwillow Raceway near Bakersfield, Calif., for the competition.

The three drivers were Caddell, Rick Gilhart and Jim Goughrey. Caddell drove his Miata to victory in the Spec Miata class, while Gilhart drove an RX-8 to the T3 championship and Goughrey took the checkered flag in Formula Mazda. Jesse Prather, who won the F production class in a Miata, declined to compete, preferring to stay on the grassroots side of the sport for now.

The judges for the competition represented motorsports from both an on-track perspective and a business standpoint. The judges were Craig Nagler from Tri-Point Engineering, MAZDASPEED6 World Challenge drivers Jeff Altenberg and Charles Espenlaub, journalists Andy Bornhop from Road & Track and Richard James from Sports Car, and vintage F1 racer John Delane.

The contestants were judged in 11 categories that took into account the total person, on the track and off.

On the track, they were scored for fastest lap time and lap time consistency driving a 2006 Mazda MX-5 Cup car. Related to their driving they were quizzed on technical feedback, suspension knowledge and data analysis — or, simply put, do they have what it takes to optimize a racecar?

Off track, in classroom interview sessions, each driver was reviewed on their written and oral sponsorship proposal, their racing resume and future goals, and a mock media interview. These were a test of whether the driver has what it takes to manage the business side of the sport and succeed as a

2007 SCCA MX-5 Cup schedule

April 21 and 22: Streets of Houston, Houston, Texas; ALMS/Champ Car

April 28 and 29: Road Atlanta, Braselton, Ga.; HSR

May 19 and 20: Mazda Raceway Laguna Seca, Monterey, Calif.; Grand Am

June 9 and 10: Portland International Raceway, Portland, Ore.; Champ Car

June 23 and 24: Burke Lakefront Airport Cleveland, Ohio (doubleheader); Champ Car

Aug. 18 and 19: Le Circuit du Trois-Rivieres, Quebec, Canada; Grand Am

Sept. 14 and 15: Miller Motorsports Park, Toole, Utah, Grand Am

professional.

The judges were impressed with all three drivers. Each driver had proven himself a national champion at the Runoffs, making this a real challenge to find the best of the best. All three drivers were very fast and very consistent; it came down to which driver had the fewest weaknesses. Caddell's 10 for 11 was just enough better to secure the prize. Now he'll be working flat out to prepare the car for racing and to secure the additional budget he'll need to make all eight races in 2007.



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