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Kasemets Wins USF2000 Race At Autobahn Country Club Saturday

JOLIET, Ill., July 31 — Pabst Racing Services' Tonis Kasemets stirred things up in the "Cooper Tires Presents the USF2000 National Championship Powered by Mazda" in more ways than one Saturday afternoon at the Autobahn Country Club. The veteran earned his first series victory over the drivers who are first and second in the point standings, Sage Karam and Patrick McKenna; he took the lead by braking late in the first turn on the first lap to vault from third to first, and then he led all 11 laps to post the victory in a Zetec-powered Van Diemen.

Kasemets, of Mundelein, Ill., is a former SCCA Formula Continental champion, he's finished as high as second in the Atlantic Championship's point standings, he's been in two Firestone Indy Lights races this year and he even has five Champ Car World Series starts. His appearance in this series, which is part of both the Indy Racing League's Road to Indy ladder system and the MAZ-DASPEED Motorsports driver development program, was similar to a trainer dropping a race horse back in class.

Kasemets said it wasn't easy, however. "I used everything I had to beat these kids," he said in victory lane. "I didn't plan anything out for the start; I was just living in the moment. I braked late and was able to get the lead. Sage gave me a good run at the end. He had no choice but to back off at the start. He's a very good driver."

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Karam, of Nazareth, Pa., earned his sixth \$500 Cooper Tires "Don't Give Up a Thing" pole award of the year during a rainy qualifying session early Saturday morning, with Zach Veach of Stockdale, Ohio alongside for an all-Andretti Autosport front row for the start of the 11-lap/30-minute race Saturday afternoon. All that fell apart at the start though, as Karam's red No. 8 sponsored by the Michael Fux Foundation, Comfort Revolution, Bell Helmets, Alpine Stars, Walters Web and artrotundo.com dropped back to fifth as Kasemets took the inside line to edge ahead.

Veach and JDC MotorSports' Mikhail Goikhberg fared even worse, as their cars were both sprawled across the track as the rest of the field picked their way around them. Goikhberg, a native of St. Petersburg, Russia, pitted for repairs and finished one lap down in tenth place, while Veach soldiered on only to experience more trouble later, ending up seventh.

Martin Scuncio of Fuerza Chile Motorsports/Cape Motorsports with Wayne Taylor Racing was even more upset than they were after the race. Scuncio, of Concepcion, Chile, qualified fifth and ran in second place for the first four laps only to have his car's fuel pump fail when he was just 0.149 of a second behind Kasemets.

Matthew Powers of Danville, Calif. turned in an impressive performance when he came from eighth to third in the early going and finished fourth after Karam and McKenna, a 22-year-old from Dublin, Ireland who drives for Cape Motorsports with Wayne Taylor Racing, passed him in the late stages. Powers said he struggled with an understeer in his Ghilotti Brothers No. 8 fielded by Liberty Motorsports in practice, so he was pleased to take the checkered flag in fourth place and earn the \$200 Tilton Hard Charger award.

Two JDC Motorsports drivers, Raphael Abbate and Martin Sala, placed fifth and sixth, followed by Veach and Javier Barrales. Sala won the \$200 Staubli award, which is presented randomly.

J.R. Smart of Fitchburg, Wis. brought out a full-course caution flag with seven laps down when he spun between Turns 3 and 4. The race was restarted on lap eight and Smart was given a black flag to report to the pits, but before he responded to that he spun again and hit the wall hard with his Pabst Racing Services/Smart Motors No. 9, bringing out another yellow on lap 10. He was transported to a local hospital, and the latest reports available said the doctors suspect he passed out but predict that he'll be fine after some rest. He is being hospitalized overnight for observation. The race ended under that second yellow with 11 laps complete.

Ardie Greenamyre of Louisville, Ky., who competes in the National class like Smart does, ended up winning that class with his AcceleRace Motorsports No. 27 Reynard Ford sponsored by Bidazzled.com, Sabelt and Sube Sports.

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PFC gift certificates went to the class-winning teams, Pabst Racing Services (\$100) and AcceleRace (\$50).

Karam set the fastest lap of the race so he'll start on the pole for a similar race here tomorrow at 1:05 p.m. local time. All the action at this event, called the Harrah's Autobahn Grand Prix presented by Mazda, is being covered live on HDNet from 12:30 p.m. to 4 p.m. Eastern time Saturday and Sunday.

Live timing and scoring is also offered at usf2000.com.

Post-race quotes follow:

Tonis Kasemets: "I used everything I had to beat these kids. I didn't plan anything out; I was just living the moment, and I braked late and was able to get the lead.

"Sage gave me a good run at the end. He had no choice but to back off at the start.

"The track was really slippery. I'll take the prize money and head to Florida like the Visit-Florida.com people say.

"I just have to thank Pabst Racing, Mazda and Cooper Tires."

Sage Karam: "They were all over the place in Turn 1 at the start.

"I'm real happy that we had a good car that could get us back up through the field. We were back to sixth or seventh at one point. The track conditions were really bad.

"I'm happy that we were able to get second, but I wish we were on top.

"I want to congratulate Tonis for his victory, and thank my sponsors, Mazda, Cooper Tires and the Road to Indy program."

Patrick McKenna: "It was chaos at the start. I had wheel spin in the muck. Then I was just trying to chase Sage and get back up through the pack.

"It was a hectic race, but enjoyable. This finish puts us in a strong position for tomorrow."

I want to thank my sponsors, especially Motorsport Ireland and Willsborough Transport, my team and my parents. We had problems on Friday, so it's good to be on the podium today."

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About Mazda:

On any given weekend there are more Mazdas on the road courses of America than any other brand of vehicle. MX-5 Miata, RX-8, MAZDA3, MAZDA6, RX-7 and other vintage Mazda models are all popular race cars because every Mazda has the soul of a sports car. In fact, the largest road-racing class in the world is Spec Miata. With more than 2,500 first- and second-generation Miatas tearing up America's racetracks, it the most-raced production car in the world. Mazda's involvement in motorsports extends to its relationship with one of the world's premier road courses, Mazda Raceway Laguna Seca in Salinas, Calif., and the Skip Barber Schools for driving and racing.

Celebrating its 40th anniversary in the United States in 2010, Mazda North American Operations is headquartered in Irvine, Calif. It oversees the sales, marketing, parts business and customer service of Mazda vehicles in the United States, Canada and Mexico through nearly 900 dealers. Operations in Canada are managed by Mazda Canada, Inc., located in Ontario. Operations in Mexico are managed by Mazda Motor de Mexico in Mexico City.

For more information see MazdaUSA.com.

About Cooper Tire & Rubber Company:

Cooper Tire & Rubber Company is a global company that specializes in the design, manufacture, marketing and sales of passenger car and light truck tires and subsidiaries that specialize in medium truck, motorcycle and racing tires. With headquarters in Findlay, Ohio, Cooper Tire has manufacturing, sales, distribution, technical and design facilities within its family of companies located in 10 countries around the world.

For more information visit Cooper Tire's Web site at coopertire.com.

About the Cooper Tires Presents the USF2000 National Championship Powered by Mazda:

Many top drivers in the IZOD IndyCar Series and endurance sports car racing honed their skills in F2000, and the Cooper Tires Presents the USF2000 National Championship Powered by Mazda is an important training ground for rising stars.

Debuting in 2010, it is the revival of the very popular USF2000 series of 1990 through 2006. Sanctioned by the Indy Racing League, it is the first step on its Road to Indy ladder system, preceding Star Mazda and Firestone Indy Lights.

It is also part of the prestigious MAZDASPEED Motorsports driver development program. The top driver in the series' Championship class earns a scholarship package from Mazda valued at \$350,000 to help him or her advance to Star Mazda the following season.

USF2000 races are contested on road courses, street courses and ovals in order to give the series' drivers experience on all the different types of tracks they will face as they proceed up the ladder.

For more information visit USF2000.com.