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By: Series Staff

Saini Scores World Challenge TC Win in New Jersey

MILLVILLE, N.J. (May. 2, 2009) - Jason Saini, of Fort Worth, Texas, captured his second-career SCCA Pro Racing SPEED World Challenge Touring Car win Saturday at New Jersey Motorsports Park's Thunderbolt Raceway. Peter Cunningham, of Milwaukee, Wis., and Andrew Aquilante, of Phoenixville, Pa., completed the top three.



Jason Saini earns his second career SPEED World Challenge victory.

Starting third in the No. 74 MAZDASPEED/Stoptech/Racinghart MAZDA6, Saini moved to second at the standing start behind first-starting Cunningham and his No. 1 Acura/RealTime/Red Line Oil Acura TSX. On lap three, Saini moved to the inside going into Turn One and took the position from the defending series Champion.

Saini's lead was not safe until a spirited late-race battle between Cunningham and Aquilante's No. 35 Phoenix Performance Inc. Subaru WRX allowed him to pull out to a 2.967-second advantage at the checkered flag. Saini averaged 87.269 mph in the 27-lap, 60.75-mile race that went caution free.

"We went through a couple of turns and got behind Peter," Saini said. "I looked at where his strengths and weaknesses were and tried to push him. I tried to stick the nose in every once and a while to see. I just had a bit of a stronger car at that point and I was able to get down on the inside. I tried one time. I didn't make it stick. I tried again and it did.

"I raced with Peter a couple of times last year. We had some side-by-side battles. He came out on top last year. This time, I came out on top. It is a dream come true to race with a guy like Peter."

It was the 2008 Rookie of the Year's second-career win. He previously won at Miller

Motorsports Park in May 2008. Ironically, his first win came on a weekend where the race team in which he co-owns, Team MER, was racing elsewhere in the SCCA Pro Racing Playboy Mazda MX-5 Cup. That series races at Road Atlanta today.

“I don’t like to be away from the team, but if I am it’s great to win,” Saini added. “When we’re at Mosport, MX-5 is at Miller and it’s a Touring Car doubleheader. Hopefully, the trend can continue.”

Cunningham qualified fifth, but started first after the top five was inverted with a post-qualifying coin flip. On lap 25, Aquilante pulled to the inside on the front straightaway and the two ran side-by-side through Turn One, with the Acura hanging on to the position.

“I really tried to get off that last complex that runs on to the front straightaway the best I could because I knew the Subaru would have a head of steam on me,” Cunningham said. “A number of times, I did take the inside line to protect that and forced him to try to pass me on the outside. He almost made it work a couple of times. But, it worked out for us.”

Cunningham’s effort around the outside of Turn One on lap 25 earned him the AutoWeek Move of the Race.

In just his third start, Aquilante earned his first-career World Challenge podium and the first podium for Subaru in World Challenge. Moving from eighth on the grid to third on lap one with the assistance of the Subaru’s all-wheel drive, Aquilante earned the Sunoco Hard Charger Award for advancing five positions in the race.

“The start was good,” Aquilante said. “It was kind of wild the first couple of laps, with Jason and P.D. going back and forth. Jason got around him and things settled in single file. Then, about halfway through the race, I started to try to pick it up and the tires started to go away.

“I finally caught up to them. I had a few runs at Peter down the front straightaway. We went side-by-side. He knew what I was going to do, so he protected the inside well. There were a couple of times he let me on the inside, but I couldn’t quite make it stick. I tried not to run him off the road. It was a good race.”

Canadian Kuno Wittmer, who won the pole in his No. 44 Acura/RealTime/Red Line Oil Acura TSX but started fifth with the inversion, ran fourth the entire race, just holding off teammate Pierre Kleinubing, of Coconut Creek, Fla., at the finish. Kleinubing set the Débaufre Fastest Lap of the Race in his No. 42 Acura/RealTime/Red Line Oil Acura TSX with a 1:31.961 (88.080 mph).

Rookie Eric Foss (MAZDA6), James Clay (BMW 328i), Toby Grahovec (Acura TSX), Nick Esayian (BMW 328i) and Alex Ratcliffe (Lexus IS300) completed the top 10.

Sebring winner Seth Thomas didn't make Turn One, when a halfshaft snapped on his No. 38 BimmerWorld/Gear Wrench BMW 328i at the standing start. Thomas had qualified second to start fourth following the inversion.

With his win, Saini moved to the World Challenge Touring Car point lead, with 224. Kleinubing is second, with 195, followed by Thomas (192), Cunningham (172) and Foss (161). Acura leads the Manufacturers' Championship Presented by RACER, with 16, followed by Mazda, with 14 and BMW, with 9.

Today's race will air Friday, May 22 at 2 p.m. (EDT) on SPEED. Rounds Three and Four of the Championship will take place in two weeks time, May 16-17, at Mosport International Raceway.

For more information, please visit www.world-challenge.com.