

Rob Bunker didn't have the start position he wanted for the July 22 Star Mazda Championship race at Portland (Ore.) International Raceway, but that may have been fortuitous. The Bridgewater, N.J., driver avoided a first-turn incident that knocked eight cars out of the race and went on to finish fourth.

Bunker started 13th on the 32-car grid, after narrowly missing on the qualifying setup for the the No. 18 AIM Autosport Pro Formula Mazda. "We thought the track would be a little bit colder and we were looking for more of a pushy [understeering] track. We set the car up as such and unfortunately, that wasn't the way the track went," he explained.

But he quickly overcame the disadvantage, passing four cars at the start of the 45-minute, 29-lap race. He gained another five positions as the cars ahead of him tangled at the first turn of the 1.944-mile track.

"Everything pretty much happened up high and I was as low as I could possibly go. I held the absolute inside line all the way down the straightaway," he said. "We were in the right place at the right time. I just stayed low inside and I watched cars spin by me on the outside. By the time we got through everything, I was sitting in fourth."

Bunker held the position to the checkered flag, logging consistently fast laps. He recorded the fourth-fastest lap of the race just four laps from the finish, noting the team's choice of a short qualifying session gave his Goodyear tires extra race grip. "We only did about 10 laps in qualifying, so those extra laps helped for the race," he said.

late podium

Bunker gained a position to finish third in the July 14 Star Mazda race at Miller Motorsports Park in Tooele, Utah, after the second-place car was disqualified. With two strong finishes in a week, he said he is comfortable racing at the front of the field: "It's definitely a great feeling, but it's not overwhelming. I feel like I belong up there."

next

Bunker's next race will be in Trois-Rivières, Qué., on Aug. 6.

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