

[■] TECH STOP

FINDING A GREAT DRAG RACING CREW

by Robert Szabo

And it was not easy. In my drag race experience, it began with a new driver and a new racecar. I was not connected to any successful existing team or even any tuner who was close by to guide my start. While I started with the intent of using an experienced driver, I later ended up in that seat. As a result, I struggled for several years. My crew was made of whoever came along or was available at the time of an outing. They were all wonderful people to help out and were looking at me for some level of leadership. That level essentially did not yet exist. I found myself burdened with the entire routine of unpacking at the track, racecar adjustment, instruction on refueling and everything else. By the time my car got to the starting line, I was a waste.

HARD TO DO IT ALL: To do a good job driving, you have to be in a mental state that is ready for driving. If you are the chief cook and bottle washer, that mental state is even a bigger task. When I was burdened with it all, the maintenance and tuning tasks filled my mind as I approached the starting line. My staging and reaction times often suffered as a result. On more than one occasion, I had been out of the driver's seat for a while. I was building, assembling, packing, unpacking, fueling, preparing and finally driving up to the starting line. Then the starting line Christmas tree would go green and, for a moment, I would not know what to do. The job of driving was momentarily gone from my brain and I would be "asleep at the tree."

AD FOR CREW: After experiences like this, I realized that a blown alcohol racecar needed several good crewmembers. That is certainly the case in many IHRA class racecars as well. So I ran an ad in the local paper: "crew wanted for drag racecar." About eight people responded. I did phone interviews with them to determine both their interest level and their availability. Two ended up in the crew.

CREW PRACTICE: We then took the racecar out to a parking lot and unpacked, started it, did burnouts, then packed. At that time, I checked with local law enforcement. They said industrial parking lots during off hours were OK. I always kept an uninhabited open field as the emergency shut off area both ahead and behind. Some areas, however, do have restrictions for noise and access that may not allow this. We did that practice several times until the crew became familiar with tasks around the racecar. Yes, practice. After my own failings in preparation and watching many others also fail with a new setup, simple crew practice sessions became high priority. Soon after, when we went to the track, running the racecar was a breeze. It became apparent to me how much better this was since I could now concentrate on safety as well as the other responsibilities.

SECOND TIME AROUND: On the second occasion, after moving across country, I turned down the power level for a lower maintenance, lower cost race field. I teamed up with an experienced racer who took on much of the tuning and crew responsibilities. I prepped and packed the racecar and delivered it to the racetrack. Then he and other crew persons who joined up took over. I only assisted maintenance on race day and concentrated on qualifying position and driving. We were successful at the local events. I could feel the success as a natural byproduct. There was more time to fine-tune the operation with the good help I was getting. Unfortunately when I moved again, it split up that team.

THIRD TIME AROUND: I changed the engine combination to some newer more powerful parts and the tune up had yet to be found. Fortunately, a neighbor named Dave offered to help. His enthusiasm revitalized the car racing effort. I took the time to share with him the entire racecar setup. Tightening the cold valve lash 0.010 inches over hot lash on our aluminum block was one example. Staggering rear tire pressure to steer the racecar straight was another. Dave is an outstanding craftsman and was eager to learn it all. I shared with him my knowledge including where I was strong (which was the fuel system) and where I needed help (which was the clutch). He was grateful for the knowledge. His skills and enthusiasm added a great deal to the team.

THEN THERE WERE TWO: In one of the first test outings, we met a spectator named Scott with similar enthusiasm. It was his very first drag race as a spectator. I sensed Scott's excitement and asked if he wanted to drive the tow car at that outing. He agreed and has been with us ever since. We went on a series of test outings, often with only one test pass completed before breakage would occur. Dave and Scott hung in there, though. Many times, their enthusiasm was the only thing that kept me going.

CREW SEAT TIME: It started with Dave riding in the racecar from and to the pits. The racecar was too small for Scott, but he remained happy with tow car driving. In effect, he gets more seat time than I do. Later, the extra climbing in and out of the racecar became a burden and concentration on something new kept me even busier. With that, my neighbor also handled the seat time warming up the racecar. It may sound silly to some: who would not want to crawl into their racecar even to start it and warm it up. I can only tell you from experience that when you own it, pay for it, work long hours on it, and it breaks or blows the tires loose, sometimes you need some distance. Blown alcohol racecars as well as many IHRA class cars are a bit of a trip to a crew person sitting behind the wheel while the car is running on the pit stands. The engine is jumping around at idle and the racecar jerks a few inches sideways when the throttle is rapped. Of course, the engine roar from eight exhaust pipes doesn't hurt. Note that class rules, now or in the future, may impose restrictions on racecar seat occupants for towing or when the engine is running.

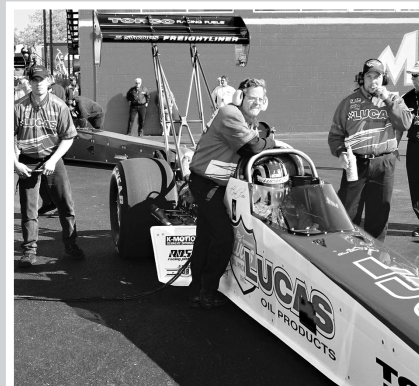
CREW EXPANSION: We soon found our combination. There was no longer any breakage. Dave continued to get involved in the tune up and clutch settings. He went off on his own at events to get more clutch information from various participants and bring it to our team. For example, he found out about clutch counter weight stagger in moderate power setups such as ours. That is setting up clutch engagement fingers into two or three opposing sets with differing counter weights between the sets. Man, did that ever work well in our setup.

Then another crew person named Mike came onboard. I spent more time passing on information to the crew as new tasks occurred. I found that patience, and my highest priority, was spending time with the crew members. That time was all worth gold. It made the crew qualified and freed me up for new tasks such as record keeping enough information to write books.

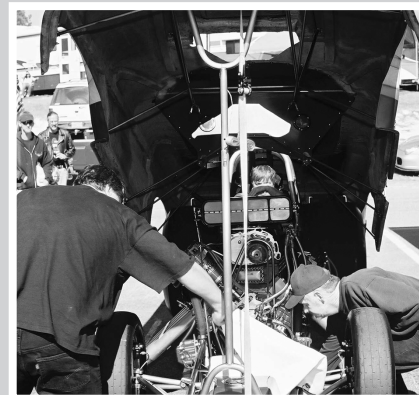
PATIENCE: To do a thorough job of turning work over to crew persons often takes a lot of patience. My motive was to be relieved of various tasks on the racecar to save time. Some race owners are more patient than others. Impatience often interferes with completing the training, and the task resides with the owner or driver. To dig deep into myself and examine the patience to do that, I had to put myself in the shoes of the crew person.

That person is somewhat distant from the race vehicle. Usually he or she does not own it, drive it, or pay for it, so that person's interests are at a different motivation. When I was a crew person before, it was for the excitement of participation. I always wanted to learn about the technology and was always grateful when the team insiders would pass information onto me. It was especially gratifying to be entrusted with an important tuning or maintenance task. In exchange for that knowledge and the trust in me, I was motivated to continue to participate.

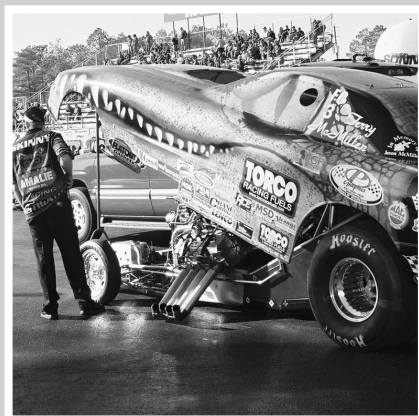
CREW GREW MORE & DID IT ALL: A couple high school students named Randy and Jason hung around our team and we asked them to join. Racing life became a blast. We had enough assistance to do most of the tasks without my involvement at the track. Dave took over the crew chief responsibility. In our later outings, I would leave the team in the pits, go to the starting line and watch the tree to "get my head in gear." Then with great joy when our class was called, I would see our car towed up to the staging lines. The skilled crew would prepare it all. I would walk out from the grandstands and join the team, put on my fire suit and climb in. The car would start and run like a top. That became the highlight of my racing fun. Winning was certainly important. However, win or lose, the organization and total service the team effort brought to the outings could not be described. I believe the team spirit resided within every team member as well. It certainly did not hurt that everyone who could fit in the racecar got some seat time as well. •



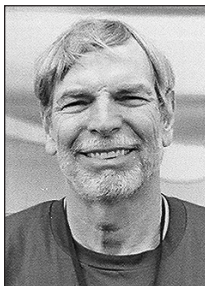
Bruce Litton's Top Fuel Crew at the World Finals ready to start their racecar. This league of IHRA racing is only possible with a qualified crew.



Tony Bogolo's Top Alcohol drag race team preparing for the next round at Rockingham.



Terry McMillen's Alcohol Funny Car/ readied by an experienced and qualified crew.



About the Author

Bob Szabo is an owner / driver of a blown alcohol drag racecar and author of the technical book: "Fuel Injection Racing Secrets." The author's next book is on methanol racing fuel that will be out shortly. Check the DRM Yellow Pages for Szabo Publishing or look on the Internet at <http://www.racecarbook.com> or call (707) 446 2917. If you have any comments about this article or any previous articles by the author, feel free to e-mail directly to the author at bob@racecarbook.com or to the DRM staff: pamelamarchyshyn@livenation.com or michaelperry@livenation.com NOTE: If you have spam controls and you Email any of us & want a response, please enter our Email address to clear your spam blocker. Time may not permit us to register to your spam blocker.