THE BURNOUT BOX MANAGER: What Few Racecar Drivers, Team Owners, Or Crewpersons Know About This Important Position If They Have Never Done It

by Robert Szabo

RACING EVENT PEOPLE: Drag racing was always a passion. As I attended the many racing events starting in the ’60s, the abundance of race vehicles filled my memories. Yet, racing event personnel were always present, and I often did not notice or recall their work or responsibilities. They made the events go on, sometimes with difficulty, but usually with little problem and a lot of entertainment. Then a few years ago, I became acquainted with one of the local racetrack officials who invited me to participate in running various races.

THAT CRAZY BURNOUT: My first assignment was the staging or burnout box manager. At IHRA events, that assignment is usually for racecars located from 60 feet before the burnout box to 20 feet after it. To those unfamiliar with the lingo, the burnout box is a ditch or area of the racetrack with a pool of water. Racecars drive through it or around it and back into it. Then they spin the drive tires to clean them. As the water patch thins out, the tire starts smoking. Some cars lock the front brakes and hold the car in position. The rear tires then fill the air with tire smoke. Then the driver releases the front brakes and the car goes forward a few feet spinning the drive tires. Some racecars drive through the burnout box. A few feet after the drive tires get wet, they nail the throttle and smoke the tires. That smoking gets the tires hot when the racecar screams out of the burnout box towards the starting line.

Some drivers smoke them over the starting line. This burnout is a crowd favorite and harkens back to a standard in the sport.

OCCASIONAL DUTY: I have had many experiences driving through the burnout box behind the wheel of my blown altered. I have also had occasional experiences with standing next to a fellow competitor’s drag race car watching that burnout. Occasionally a driver would ask me to coach a burnout. I would stand there, motioning the driver up to a location on the burnout box area where the pavement is wet.

Then, when the track starter or burnout box manager approved, I would motion the driver to proceed.

BURNOUT BOX FUNDAMENTALS: The first starter I worked with was a polite associate who must have understood the insecurity from the new assignment. He said to stack them up. In racing terms, that meant to run them through as fast as possible. The trigger for directing the next pair of cars up to the burnout box was when the pair of cars on the racetrack staged on the starting line. Then when they were released and got to the half-way point, the racecars in the burnout box were signaled to start their burnout. A clinched hand signal held the cars in the burnout box. An open hand spinning the arm released the cars. After the burnout, the cars would stage at the starting line. The starter took over at that point.

BEST SEAT IN THE HOUSE: In the beginning, the starter motioned me for the timing of when to pull up the next pair. Soon I caught on to the pace. I watched every pair go down the track to the half-way point. Then I would release the next pair of cars in the burnout box. There was usually a staging manager in the staging lanes. I motioned that person to pull the next pair of drag race vehicles forward to the burnout box. People would walk up to me after their runs and ask how their cars looked going through the finish line and I realized that I never saw them after the half-way point. My pacing job focused on the next pair of racecars. It was interesting to me that here I was in a key position of viewing the racing but instead I became confused in the task of pacing and the burnout.

DANGER: Awhile back, a racecar was started in the staging lanes. Some type of fluid went over the starting line. The inspector who approved the car with street tires joined me in a safety instructional class for this participant. Yes, those tires are light. No, they are not safe. Then there was the fellow who left his door open and I watched him pump the brake pedal to build up brake pressure so the pedal would not go to the floor. No, they are not.

SAFETY FOREMOST: The first confusion for me was getting the right cars in the correct lane. There were various rules from time to time. One was to run street cars with street tires only one of the lanes. Those street tires would tear up the remnant rubber on the racetrack so we kept them in only one of the lanes. I had to double check cars coming from the staging lanes to get the drag only cars with slicks on the right and the other street-cars always on the left lane. Often drivers would ignore the staging lane manager and try to sneak into a lane of choice while approaching the burnout box. That confrontation would peak with the burnout box manager who was responsible for straightening out any unauthorized lane switching.

AUTHORIZED: I was soon impressed with how many of the competitors relied upon me to motion them up to the burnout box. Some ignored me and acted like they knew what to do. Occasionally my teacher, the track official, would walk up to them and say wait for your release from him (pointing to me). After a few of those, I gained confidence to manage my own responsibility and would maintain control over all of the cars, including the know-its all.

RESPONSIBILITY: This may seem trivial, especially to National Championship seekers, however, you have no idea what it is like to do what looks like a simple job. One common occurrence is brakeage in the starting line. Without management of the burnout box pacing, you quickly end up with racecars stacked up ahead of the box waiting for the pair on the starting line. One is broken and the event stops. I saw occasions where we had to back one or more cars out from the burnout box to make room for the broken car to be pushed out.

THE TEACHERS: Sportsman racers are often the professionals of the self-starting racecars. When I was new to the staging assignment, many an experienced sportsman racer set the pace and anticipated my command or the ones I was supposed to do. I learned fast and went on from there.

I’LL NEVER DRIVE THE SAME: Often all of the stakes are on a race, and the staging manager must try to hold the odds even for both competitors. It is a central job in the running of the race. Most of the emotion and experience I have cannot be described, but after that period in my drag racing participation, I became a more respectful driver. At an event, I would sometimes walk up to the staging manager, watch him or her, and get to know any peculiarities. But now, I know enough about that position to respect the responsibility that it has. Hats off to all of the IHRA event folks who do that job. And thanks for doing what you do.

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