

WORKING THE STARTING LINE

by Robert Szabo

BACKGROUND: In our last technical article, work at the burnout box or staging management position was discussed. Tasks such as lane confirmation, safety equipment check, no leaks and the biggest one of all, pacing the race, were all presented. All of that is in preparation for the staging, starting the race and completing it. Supervision of the next set of tasks in a race lap falls onto the event starter. I had the fortunate experience of meeting Clyde Peake at the World Finals. Peake is the one racers fly by after the burnout. He is the one who manages the starting line and is also the one watching your run and shut down so you are clear of the track in preparation for the next racecars. Peake is on his 25th year as an IHRA event starter. Clyde said that from time to time, he accompanies a race team before or after an event and experiences the other side of racing rather than one of working at an event. He mentioned the incredible amount of work and preparation that goes into an IHRA drag race vehicle and in a similar manner, wishes more racer's experienced his side of working at the race -- that of an event starter.

WORKING THE BURNOUT BOX: After several years of participation on the other side of drag racing, I stepped over to Peake's side of drag racing. In addition to various assignments I had working at the local racetrack, the starting position was probably one of the most exciting experiences I have ever had. The starter is not the star of the show; the racer is. However, the starter is the director of each race lap in the eyes of the spectators and the racers and while a lot of the race event, including starting and the pace, is dependent on many people behind the scenes, the event starter is the one on stage in front of it all. My short experience in the starter's position changed my racing attitude as other track working experiences have. I can well appreciate Peake's responsibilities.

IN THE BEGINNING: I remember the first time I was given the control box. It was a small switch panel with a reset switch, a start switch and an emergency off and warning light switch. Yes, only three switches. Yet, the correct timing and operation of all three is a responsibility that must be taken seriously. At most IHRA national and divisional events now, an "Automatic Start" controller is used that provides the operation of those switches. However, this was a "Manual Start" controller. In this experience, two full-bodied bracket cars were in the water box ready to do their burnout. The burnout box manager was looking at me for direction to release those cars, so I gave the traditional swinging hand and finger signal. The burnout box manager motioned to the racecars. They spun up the rear tires against their line locked front brakes and then released the brake and shot forward, smoking the rear tires. Each one stopped at the starting line, one racecar on either side of me.

COPYCAT: I copied the behavior of the starter person I was replacing; that was to first watch the track to check that the previous racecars completed their runs without dropping any fluids on the track. That inspection was necessary for the entire length of the racetrack. While the event starter cannot physically inspect the entire eighth or quarter mile (plus shut down length), he watches the cars on the track for signs of smoke, or drifting, or out of shape handling. Most of the time, the cars simply complete the race with little release of fluids. At IHRA national and divisional events, added event staff members provide valuable assistance.

I watched for the pair of race cars that ran until they exited the racetrack. Now the race was all mine. After the race cars staged, I counted 1001, 1002, 1003 and hit the launch switch.

I'LL NEVER BE THE SAME AGAIN: The racecars launched and I was no longer a beginner to the event starter position. I carefully watched the racecars go down the racetrack. Soon after the finish lights went on signaling the completion of the run, I gave the hand signal to the burnout box manager to release the next pair of racecars from the burnout box. This sounds simple, but it is not to a responsible event starter. The RESPONSIBILITY for the racecars that just ran is not over yet. I had to continue to watch as the racecars slowed down until both exited the track. During the slow down, I had to watch for smoke or any indication of fluids or parts from either racecar.

To speed up the pace of an event, racecars in the burnout box are usually released to do their burnouts before the current race is complete. It gets a little dicey when the next pair of cars is ready to stage and one or both of the previous racecars has a problem on the track.

DISCOMFORT: I was not comfortable with the pace the event starter established before me, so I inquired with the track manager about the pace. He said to slow it down to my comfort level. I waited longer after each run to release the next pair of racecars. I noted an immediate increase in tension among some of the drivers. They were used to a pace that was suddenly slowed down. As a driver, I would have been the same. Impatient. I mean "I have been suited up roasting in my racecar. I am ready to go. Lets get on with it. Lets go!"

Now when I approach a starting line as a racecar driver, I look more at the burnout box manager and the event starter. If I see tension on their faces, I increase my awareness. If I am held up by one or the other or shut down, I keep my emotions and mouth shut. I now know of the myriad of happenings going on at the starting line. I

am dependent on a dedicated staff, watching the racetrack, the previous competitors, the other competitor, the weather, the timing clocks and many other things.

My worst experience was from interruptions. One night a racer walked up to me on the starting line and asked something. As we were talking, a motorcycle staged and revved up, waiting for the launch. After a moment, I realized he was waiting for me and I quickly launched him. That diversion added about two or three seconds to the motorcycle revving. However, the motorcycle racer handled it very well. His reaction time was instantaneous even with the delay. I learned even further from that experience of the level of concentration that an event starter must maintain.

SO CLOSE TO AN OILDOWN: The importance of engine diapers is now obvious to me. At the events I worked, I often helped clean up after oil downs. Nuts, bolts, wrenches and other small parts were almost always found on the track in addition to the oil. Usually too small to be of any consequence, they still could leave a good dent in an inner fender well from flying up from a turning race tire, not to mention launching the racecar into a yaw (crooked).

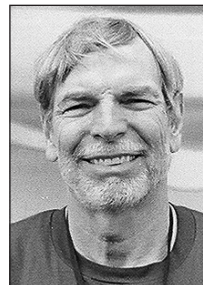
STARTER IN CONCERT WITH THE TRACK SURFACE: On a cool, humid morning I watched a brand new Corvette, on a run, spin out into the guardrail. The car was driven back to the pits afterwards, however, the front end was not pointing the same direction as the back end. From that and other similar experiences, I watched and learned the racetrack surface as well as I could. If the track was humid or cold, I tried to warn the crew or drivers, especially those with the higher-powered racecars.

OUT OF CONTROL: During another test night, a full-bodied bracket car was darting all over the racetrack after the launch. As a racecar owner with some experience in setup, I realized something was wrong with this car. It looked like something was broken in the rear suspension. I have seen that before when it seems to take about four completely out of shape runs before the driver or car owner gets the message. Anyhow, I watched the sequence of runs unfold.

The problematic car made a couple more passes. The driver appeared to be working frantically on it between those runs. He worked on it in staging and near the burnout box just before it was started. During the last run, the race car was staged with a street driven slower car. After the launch, the problematic race car darted across the centerline into the other lane and had a minor collision with the guardrail. The car in that lane was a relatively slower car and was fortunately behind the racecar when this incident occurred. As a result, it was not involved. However, it appeared the street driver did not know what to do with another racecar in front of him. He slowed, drove around and idled on down the track.

EXPERIENCED OBSERVER: Since my short-lived event starter experience, I have observed many incidents that involve others in that position. On a few occasions in evening events, a pair of racecars was launched while a previous racecar was stalled on the track shut down area in a location with poor lighting. The vital need for those working taillights became obvious to me. You can lose your whole operation with a failed taillight, a stall on the track and an oversight at the starting line that can lead to the launch of the next racecars.

LEAVE EM ALONE; THE STARTER'S JOB IS UNDERSTATED: In addition to the staging or burnout manager's job of watching for leakers and lane assignments, the event starter has that same task and the job of the final "go or no-go" point for each pair of racecars that go by. While the event starter is watching cars go down the track, free of smoke or fluids release, signaling the next pair, watching them for leaks or safety oversights, trying to increase the pace of an event when it is behind, getting signals from other event personnel about anything that is a potential interruption to the event or safety risk to the driver, crew, or starting line workers, (whew) getting occasional lip from championship seekers about their last run in their 36 HP econobox, the event starter has to watch the weather. A rain drop, racetrack deterioration, timing clock failure, unplanned events such as an animal running onto the racetrack, spectators getting too close anywhere along the track or shutdown area, coordinate a four or five tenths tree, under or over staging, a staggered start, pro start, Christmas Tree start, long or short stage delay, shallow or deep stage, windows up, fire suit on, shoulder belts tightened, neck collar on, helmet fastened, visor down, no unusual sounds from the engine, and ducking if it blows up. With all of that in mind, we should have a "be kind to your event starter" day. Thank you Peake!•



Bob Szabo is a drag racecar book author, and FunnyCar owner & driver. Much of that experience is captured in his current book, "Fuel Injection Racing Secrets." This book tells how to do your own methanolic fuel injection setup for maximum performance. Bob's new book about the science of racing with METHANOL will also be out shortly. Bob is a lifetime student and proponent of technology. For book ordering information, check the DRM Yellow Pages for his Fuel Injection book listing under S's (for Szabo) or look on the Internet at <http://www.racecarbook.com> or call (707) 446 2917.