

THE “MEN” IN WHITE

By Jim Lowe

The next time you watch a race, take your eyes off the cars for a second and look around the track. You will see a group of white clothed people huddled in a mass at every corner. They will be waving colorful flags, have more communications equipment hanging on them than a NASA controller, and on occasion, will scurry out onto the track to assist a car and driver to get him out of harm's way. These courageous people are known as the corner workers. They are dedicated men and women who enjoy racing “up close and personal” and support the track during the events. Corner workers are non paid volunteers who come to the events at their own expense, work long hours in every kind of weather, and take some personal risk while performing professional duties to maintain safety.

The most obvious identification of a corner worker is the color of their clothing. They wear all white so the drivers in their cars will not mistake them for a waving flag. A race driver is focused on car handling and may only see a glimpse of a corner station while sorting out enormous amounts of information needed to maintain position. Workers have various colored flags in their hands to indicate course conditions / driver information and a blend of several colors might send the wrong message to the drivers. They also have long pants and sleeves and the clothing is all cotton to protect themselves from fire burns or metal cuts should they have to respond to an emergency. Since the workers have to remain on station throughout the race, they are equipped with all weather gear.

Workers communicate their information to the drivers by the use of flags. There are eight flags used in racing. Corner workers routinely use six. The starter controls the green and checker flags. Green flag means the course is clear and the checker flag means the race/practice is over; return to the pits. Corner workers use the following flags: yellow, blue, debris, white, black, and red. The yellow flag held stationary means take care, danger, slow down, no passing, from the flag until past the emergency. A waving yellow means great danger, slow down, be prepared to stop, no passing, from the flag until past the emergency area. A double yellow (two flags side by side), displayed at all stations, means the entire course is under yellow conditions. The blue/yellow stripe flag is an advisory flag to a driver to let him know that a faster car is following close behind or trying to overtake him. A yellow /red stripe flag is used as a surface condition flag to indicate debris or liquids (slippery surface) are on the track. The white flag is shown to indicate an emergency vehicle or slow moving racecar (mechanical problems) is on course, take care. The black flag, shown usually with a car number board, means proceed to the pits and consult with race officials for unsafe/improper driving. A black with orange ball flag is shown to a car that has a mechanical problem and he should return to the pits at reduced speeds. The red flag is displayed to indicate extreme danger, the session is stopped, come to a complete stop at the side of the course. The meanings of these flags may vary from different race organizations.

Corner workers get their training and qualifications by attending flagging and communications (F&C) schools and on the job training. Most of the race clubs have

these schools routinely throughout the year. One of the best-recognized clubs is the SCCA. There are region clubs throughout the U.S. and anyone can become a member.

A prospective worker first joins a club and then attends club races throughout the year as a worker. The membership fee includes medical insurance coverage for any injury that may occur at a race. The worker will receive instructions on the various duties by the corner captain. There are usually four workers assigned to a station, a captain, a communicator, a blue flagger and a yellow flagger. The flag/communicator positions are usually rotated throughout the day so all workers know the positions for flexibility. The worker carries a logbook to record the number and kind of race that he has worked. After enough experience is obtained, the worker may apply for a license upgrade from a flag official. There are not a pre-determined number of races to be worked for an upgrade but rather it is based on past performance observed by the officials. Some of the races, especially the pro races and international events may only accept the higher licensed grade workers to insure highly trained and experienced personnel. A corner worker must continue to work races to hold his/her license grade. For more information on corner working guidelines, go to www.texasscca.org. There you will find a downloadable comprehensive manual on corner working/flagging and race communications by Jake Davis.

The rewards received from working corners are as varied as the number of workers on the corners. First, there is the reward of being an integral part of the racing organization and being able to make the sport as safe and as much fun as possible for the drivers and the spectators. There is also personal satisfaction of developing a skill based on team performance of a highly professional volunteer group. An obvious reward is getting the "best seat in the house" to watch racing! The racing organizations reward the workers by providing daily meals and after race parties, having worker prize drawings such as corner working equipment, hats, shirts, and other souvenir items. Since workers are volunteers and are not paid for their professional duties, the race organizers go out of their way to show their appreciation. There is also the reward of having a group of friends with which you can share your race experiences and stories. Workers travel around the country and develop a comradery of some of the zaniest characters in the land. But the best reward a corner worker can get is a sincere "Thanks" at the end of the day from a driver.