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Race and culture

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The track is quiet in the morning, cool and calm as the surrounding forest under a blanket of late spring morning mist. The stillness is broken by the sound of a screaming engine—a racer? No, it’s a white van careening down Sam Posey Straight, packed full with grizzled dudes (and two less-grizzled ladies) sitting shoulder to shoulder in the creaking cabin. These are the marshals of Lime Rock Park, and they’re getting set up for the day.I feel entirely out of place in their midst, the only one wearing skinny jeans instead of a white jumpsuit, but no one’s paying attention to me anyway. The flagging crew, including my brother, is busy calling out station assignments and reviewing track condition notes. These people have known each other for decades; it’s obvious in the way they speak to each other. The salty banter, the giving and taking of instruction without a hint of nicety or resentment on either end. How was it that I’d ended up at the front lines with this pack of lifetime veterans? We stop every few hundred yards to push another couple of people out onto the track and into the mist, fire drill-style. At our post, I tumble out after my brother and make my way to a grassy plot equipped with a picnic table, which no one will end up using, and an open shed. Someone tosses me a bottle of SPF 80 sunscreen. For the moment, which won’t last long, it’s once again very quiet.The Human Safety NetThe role of a corner worker is to be the arbiter of safety at any sanctioned motorsport event. In essence, they function as a track’s nervous system, monitoring all aspects of the race to ensure everything is proceeding as it should. When it’s not—an on-track obstacle, a dickish driver, a wreck—flaggers must immediately raise the alarm and take control. It’s also a notably dangerous job, sitting inches from a hot track. You quite literally cannot have a professional race at any level without marshals, be it a Saturday night enduro or an F1 Grand Prix. And you might be surprised to learn that the crew at both is largely volunteer.Yes, even the pinnacle of motorsport relies on an army of unpaid workers who are there for the love of racing. Flagging has long been a way for civilians to become members of this insular world, and for unfunded drivers to break into the scene. But these days, it’s a dying culture. The behind-the-scenes allure doesn’t draw in young converts like it used to. Marshals are older than ever. And anyone looking to become the next Lewis Hamilton has a million different paths to the top, few of which have to involve waving a flag or working anonymously behind the scenes. Jon Tenca | Puck Stopper Photography
So for those still at it, putting themselves at risk and giving up untold weekends with zero recognition from fans, why do they do it? Because flaggers are racing’s roadies, with the added responsibility that a driver’s life could end up in your hands. For diehard fans, a ten-hour workday with exhaustion guaranteed and dismemberment a real (if remote) possibility is a worthy price for getting as close to the action as they’re ever going to get. Marshalls speak of it as a calling, akin to driving itself.“You lead with it,” says SCCA (Sports Car Club of America) vet Bob Dowie, currently the venerable organization’s regional director for New England, New York, and northern New Jersey. He’s been a zealot ever since he started coming to races at Lime Rock back in the ’70s. “It doesn’t matter what you do for a living, if you drive or you flag, that’s how you introduce yourself in life.” Marshaling is not for the faint of heart. You are feet from the track. There is little between you and the violence of a car going 140 mph, a truth that can sometimes have deadly consequences—in 2018, an experienced volunteer corner worker at Laguna Seca was killed during an amateur track day when he left his protected position to wave a caution flag and was struck by an out-of-control Porsche traveling at over 100 mph that had skidded on an oil slick.Sometimes, you’re the first person to approach a burning car you just watched smash a safety barrier and flip over a few times. Your heart lives in your throat in those moments, until, as one Formula One flagger put it to me, “a 19-year-old German kid rolls out and gives you a shaky thumbs-up,” and your adrenalin courses so high you forget you weren’t the one driving. “I’ve flagged with lawyers, doctors, literal rocket scientists,” says Willa Bruckner, Lime Rock’s co-Flag Chief. “The only thing I care about at the track is if they have my back.” Again, she means literally. In some placements, your partner serves as the eyes in the back of your head. If there’s danger, you trust they’ll pull you out of the way. If your first instinct is one of pure self-preservation when a piece of debris comes flying at your station, you probably shouldn’t be trackside. Dairo Chamorro (Pixel Experiment)
My father, an SCCA member since the ’60s and a driver since 1983, raised us around the paddock, most often at Connecticut’s Lime Rock Park. We learned an awareness of space early, in a place where there was no room for mistakes, even for children, as millions of dollars’ worth of heavy machinery hummed around us at the track. We knew to have leed rags ready to hand over when a helmet came off, and not to stare at Paul Newman when he came around. He’s also marshaled for SCCA, IMSA and Formula 1 over the last fifty years, and started my brother in the trade at age seventeen.I was already planning to attend the Pirelli World Challenge—a USAC series now known as GT World Challenge America—race at Lime Rock in May of 2018 when my brother called a few days before with a question that came out as more of a statement. “You’re grandfathered in,” he said. “You’ll be looked after the entire time, but we need another pair of eyes.” Things have been restructured slightly since then, but at the time, the World Challenge ran eight classes ranging from Touring Car spec Honda Civics and BMW M235is to GT3 Lamborghiniis and Ferraris. Purses were in the low five-figure range. Pure novices don’t usually end up working races at this level.But he vouched for me, and the next thing I knew we were rolling out of the van in the early fog and walking to our station: Top of the Uphill. (All track posts sound like titles of Manga fan fiction: Big Bend, No Name Straight, The Esses, Bottom of the Uphill.)“That’s a tough spot,” Bruckner says. “Drivers catch air coming up a blind hill, so if something happens there, it’s usually very bad.” Lime Rock Park It’s the marshals’ job to communicate with drivers, race control, and each other about emergency situations, driver behavior, track conditions, any of a hundred different variables that can change instantly. The SCCA has a reputation for providing some of the world’s best flaggers, they’re in high demand for Formula One and IMSA events all over North America. As the organization itself states, being a good corner worker requires many of the same traits as being a good driver: Concentration. Situational awareness. Coolness under pressure. The track was the Wild West back in the 1970s and ’80s, but now there are rules about approaching that aforementioned burning car or assisting the driver in immediate peril. Improved safety standards mean there’s less of a need these days for flaggers to double as first responders as well. But it will always come down to instinct.In 1984, my father was working a Formula Atlantic race at Lime Rock when a car hit an embankment. The hard impact sent the nose cone flying across the roadway just as he took off in a run toward the scene. A trackside photograph taken at that very instant shows the cone frozen in space inches from his nose; it was moving so fast that he never even saw it scything through the air. He didn’t know how close he came to being killed. When emergency vehicles arrived, he was kneeling in the dirt with the driver, whose heart stopped almost immediately after being recovered from his destroyed car.It’s a strange feeling to go chasing after a car still lost in a cloud of dust, even stranger to know that as a flagger, it’s our feedback that brings the entire track to a screeching halt. On most pro-level road courses, no singular vantage point exists. Cameras and caution lights have their place, but there is still no substitute for a network of people who can pop out a caution flag and alert the entire track while a crash is still unfolding. World Challenge TV
The 2018 Pirelli World Challenge at Lime Rock. And the adage about 93% of communication being nonverbal? That’s extremely true for racing. Hand signals, a standing flag versus a waving one, the sight of a marshal bursting into a run—it all factors in when seconds matter.A Flagger’s First Race DayAmong the myriad warnings I was issued as a first-time flagger was that somehow, somewhere, I was going to get shoved. Sure enough, within an hour my station chief boots me out of the way when a Trans Am scrapes the grass not far from my feet. “I was standing there once when a tire exploded,” he says casually afterward. “If it hadn’t hit the tree instead, it would have taken my head off.” Oh. Okay. Of course, there’s no way to predict where errant debris or cars will strike, but you can still avoid spots notorious for attracting trouble if you know the track. Unless you yourself are that spot. World Challenge TV
The 2018 Pirelli World Challenge at Lime Rock. We’d already had several dustups when my brother and I are the first to reach a car that went off after sliding too quickly out of a chicane. I can still hear my heart in my ears after we radio in to the tower when our station chief claps me on the back. “I think we got a magnet on our hands today,” he shouts to my brother. “Wait,” I put out a hand. “Are you saying I’m causing accidents all day?” World Challenge TV
“No, no,” another marshal says. “Every day is going to have its own number of crashes. They would’ve happened if you were here or not. But some people have a tendency to draw the action to one place.” He moves his hands together, condensing the air. This mystical track lore is new to me. My questions about how would one person pull crash energy to them are shrugged off as irrelevant to understanding that it happens. “Because they send it to the person who can take it,” someone says, as if it’s the most obvious thing in the world. I don’t ask who “they” are.I don’t have much more time to question my strange burden, because a few minutes later another hand thrusts a yellow flag in my face to brandish at oncoming traffic following a crash. The instantly recognizable caution flag is crucial, warning drivers to slow down immediately. But if held at the wrong angle, or god forbid, dropped, a racer could careen through that break in the safety net and plow headlong into slowed traffic ahead. This is a little too much responsibility for an extra hand, I think. I immediately take a step back and say “No.”Without hesitating, the marshal behind me moves forward and yanks the flag onto the track, not a second before the next car comes flying up No Name Straight and slams on the brakes. No one says a word, but I can’t help feeling as though I’d failed a test. These guys don’t seem the type to stand for any incompetence. The pressure of the moment is real, and they’ve only got time for those who can take it.Many sunburnt hours later, with the race over, drivers and crew mingle over plastic cups of wine. The septuagenarian marshal cradling his tallboy next to me gives me a poke. “I hear you did well today,” he says. “You can tell your old man raised you. A lot of people can’t stand that close to the line of fire.” I wasn’t ready to take the flag, though, I remind him.He dismisses that immediately. “You knew your limits for your first day and got the hell out of the way. That’s a lot better than doing something stupid.”The Old Guard Grows OlderI’ve rarely seen a flagger under the age of fifty since I was little, and the Pirelli World Challenge was no exception. The situation at the lower club levels is more dire. At SCCA’s 2018 Northeastern Regional annual meeting, the average age of a corner marshal was 74. It’s increasingly difficult to bring in new blood, let alone simply getting enough bodies to fill these volunteer posts for every race. All this as motorsports remain a global fixture with tens of millions of fans across its various disciplines.One obvious drain is social media, which affords a lot of the same material background access that used to be attainable solely through grueling work. But it’s also not clear that SCCA is in a position to make the kind of cultural inroads it needs to with a new generation of enthusiasts. “Twenty years ago, there were few opportunities to be on a racetrack,” says Lee Hill, Chairman of SCCA’s Board of Directors. “You could go to Skip Barber Racing School or something like that, but having a drive was too expensive to be accessible. Now you strap a GoPro to your car and show all your friends you’re on track at Sebring.” Dairo Chamorro (Pixel Experiment)
The culture of flagging, too, is not what it was. The evolution of liability laws, Hill says, is key. The old school of renegade types who have been doing it for decades simultaneously clash with and clamor for new blood. Jean and Stephen Chisholm, a legendary East Coast marshaling couple who’ve known my parents a lot longer than I have, met through racing in 1979 and have been running events together ever since. Back then it was your social circle, a whole scene. “You were on post with your friends every weekend, and the track throws you a beer party afterward,” says Jean. Now the regimented operations mean you’re often by yourself all day. “It’s more like being a hall monitor,” she says, “and if you are posted with someone, chances are you’re stuck with one of us doddering silverbacks.”As chairman of the SCCA board, Lee Hill spends a lot of time pondering how to address these shifts. One answer, he thinks, is training up marshals from the ranks of general track employees and shifting to more of a paid workforce. Making marshaling a true profession would certainly give younger people a real path to follow. As for the idea that sensor technology might one day replace flaggers, the one constant I heard on loop is that it’s impossible to fully replace the coordinated efforts of a human crew at every track. World Challenge TV
Likewise, though left mostly unspoken, is that there’s no digital stand-in for the up-close track experience. That might be the ultimate selling point yet.—There is nothing like being at Sebring Turn 17, standing two feet from the track when a prototype comes at you going 175 mph. You could reach out and touch it. Well.” Hill says with a smile, “I wouldn’t recommend it. But you could.”Janet Mercel
was raised in the paddock of some of the best tracks on the East Coast, and was learning to bleed brakes on vintage racers before she was ten. A career in design has led to contributions in Architectural Digest, Here Magazine, and The Tidalist.Top photo by Katharine Erwin.

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