

PRESCRIPTION FOR SAFER RACING

by

DR. ROBERT WADSWORTH

The time is late September in 1950 and the setting is a woodsy, multi-colored glen in upstate New York, complete with winding road entering from the right, crossing a rustic stone bridge and disappearing over a hill at the left.

If birds are there, they certainly cannot be heard . . . for the air is filled with rocketing motors and the squeal of manipulated rubber. The occasion is the third running of the International Grand Prix of Watkins Glen, New York.

Into this scene comes a man down the hill at a full run. He is bearing a radio message for the ambulance crew parked near the bridge. The driver of the ambulance starts his motor, turns on the siren, waits a moment for a gap in the stream of racing cars, then dives in and disappears up over the next hill . . . for all the world like a carp in a trout stream rapids. While this little scene is being enacted, a man on the opposite side of the bridge is calmly waving the racers on with his green flag, apparently oblivious to the danger at hand and compounding the confusion already taking place.

Many people objected to the obviously unnecessary danger to spectators, drivers and emergency crews alike, but one spectator in particular, Fred A. German of Rochester, N. Y., felt so strong about the seriousness of the situation that he wrote a letter to Fred Wacker, then president of the Sports Car Club of America, as soon as he reached home. In his letter he voiced his love of the sport as well as his objections to its abuse through sheer carelessness. As a result of this letter, he was asked to give the matter some consideration and come up with a constructive plan. With the help of Sherman W. Merling and a number of local race enthusiasts, German designed a workable system of race communications and organized a group of volunteers to place it in operation. Although unnamed at the time, this first group of volunteers was the nucleus of the now well known and highly respected Race Communications Association. The organization functioned for the first time at the 1951 Watkins Glen Grand Prix.

Realizing that danger cannot be completely eliminated from such a high-powered sport, every effort was directed toward minimizing the effects of this danger. In order to do this, a flexible communications system was set up with the basic purpose of promoting safer racing by getting ALL THE NECESSARY INFORMATION TO THE MAN WHO NEEDS TO KNOW . . . be he driver, race official, physician or a member of a pit crew.

Physical differences between such races as Watkins Glen, Cumberland, Grand Island or Wilkes-Barre require specific variations. But essentially the basic system is one of a number of Safety Teams

strategically located according to careful survey so that fields of vision overlap one another along every inch of the chosen course. Each one of these Safety Stations is manned by four R. C. A. volunteers. The Flagman, who is generally the most experienced of the group, heads the team and is ably assisted by a telephone operator, relief man and race observer. Groups of fire trucks, ambulances and wreckers, manned by professional personnel, also strategically located, back up this first line of defense.

The Safety Teams and Emergency Crews are inter-connected by telephone lines which terminate at the control center. All course information is funneled into the control center where a group of experienced communications coordinators are constantly on duty. The information received is either acted upon, or redistributed to other race officials, emergency crews or the pits.

Six flags which are world standard are used by each Safety Team. A seventh flag . . . the black flag . . . is only used by two teams to flag drivers into the pit area. These flags are divided into two categories as follows:

Course control flags—

GREEN—Course is "all clear."

RED—STOP, immediately!

YELLOW—Reduce speed to 40 MPH, keep to the extreme right.

Information flags—

WHITE—Emergency or service vehicle on the course . . . be on the alert.

RED AND YELLOW STRIPES—Slippery course, use extreme caution.

BLUE—Get over, someone wants to pass you.

BLACK—Stop at your pit.

The Communications Coordinator can, by the judicious use of the various flags, slow traffic in the vicinity of a minor accident, stop the race in the event of an accident of catastrophic proportions, call for emergency equipment and insure safe progress around the course, inform pit crews of mechanical failures occurring at distant points, or perform a number of other tasks essential to the safe conduct of the event.

Today, as you watch the races, keep your eye on the members of the Race Communications Association, with the knowledge that through their efforts sports car racing continues to flourish in this country. They can be easily identified by their snappy white uniforms and their strict adherence to their assigned duties. No where else in the world will you find a group specifically experienced to help the driver see around his next corner and generally make his performance more enjoyable. By furnishing all the necessary information to all who need it, these men have brought order to our previous glimpse of former racing confusion.