



The New Racer's Guide

First Time at the Track

Whether or not we thought we were prepared, we have all made idiots out of ourselves at one time or another by not following the rules, knowing the etiquette, or just being a newbie in general. But it doesn't have to be that way! The local track is not a scary place, and there's no need for you to put off entering your first race. Take a page from our collective experience, and then take the plunge and hit the track. You'll wonder why you didn't go sooner.

How Qualifying Works

The idea of qualifying is to turn in the fastest time you can, which means you are racing the clock, **not** the other racers on the track. That doesn't mean you'll be on the track by yourself, but that you're racing the clock rather than the other racers is certainly an important thing to consider. If you are driving side-by-side with another car in qualifying, it is better to give each other a little room rather than try to out-race each other. Your position on the track is irrelevant, and trying to race somebody will only make things harder on both of you and open up the possibility of a crash. If you don't allow the obviously faster cars to get past you in qualifying, you certainly won't make any friends at the track and you'll end up slowing down in the process.

You will probably encounter one of two different types of qualifying: heads-up racing or IFMAR-style starts (also known as staggered starts). In heads-up racing, qualifying will be just like a race — the starting horn will sound and you're off. With IFMAR-style qualifying, the tone will sound and the announcer will call off the drivers' names one by one. When your name is called, it is your turn to go. Don't worry — your race timer will not begin until the very first time your car crosses the line. Likewise, be sure to keep racing at the end of the heat until the announcer says that you are finished. Your qualifying heat does not end until the first time you cross the line after your own race clock has expired. At the end of all the qualifying sessions, your position in the actual races (known as "mains") will be determined by your single fastest qualifying run. When running 5-minute qualifiers, for example, a 23/5:05 would mean you did 23 laps in 5 minutes and 5 seconds, which would be faster than a 23/5:12 — the same number of laps, but taking 7 seconds longer. Once you have read a few qualifying printouts (often referred to as "heat sheets") you'll get the hang of it.



How Racing Works

Hopefully, you already have a good idea of how racing works. The starting tone sounds, and you drive like crazy until you take the checkered flag! Actually, there are still a few things to be aware of. First and foremost, your fellow racers will judge your character by how you behave on the track. It doesn't matter if you're a good or bad driver from the get go, but how you treat the other drivers makes all the difference in the world. Your first few times at the track, don't expect to go out and win; do your best, but spend your time learning the feel of your car and the nuances of racing. Don't make potentially hazardous maneuvers during a race that could wreck other cars, and be careful to let faster cars pass you easily if they should come up behind you. By doing this, not only will you make friends among the other drivers, you will gain the reputation of being a calm and honorable competitor. That reputation can and will follow you for a long time, so you don't want to mess it up right away! When your first race is over, don't be afraid to approach other drivers and ask them for advice about your driving or anything you may have done wrong. We were all beginners at one point or another, and most everybody in this hobby is more than happy to share their experience with others.

Follow The Rules

You will find that rule restrictions are generally pretty relaxed for rookie classes and for people racing for the first time. Still, it pays to learn the rules early on and follow them as soon as you can. Things like body and wing height, engine or motor limits, tires, and even traction additives are all typical restrictions that the track may observe. Before turning on your radio or car, make sure to talk to the race director to make sure you're not making a racer's faux pas by running that hand-wound stock motor you found on eBay.

Track Etiquette

There are a lot of little dos and don'ts that you'll pick up as you spend more and more time at the track. Some of them are very important, while others are just common courtesies that everybody is expected to observe. They aren't that hard, so pay attention!

1. **Radio Frequency** – Every track will have some sort of radio frequency board that is used to identify who is on what frequency. Most racers now run on 2.4 MHz radios which eliminate the need for frequency control. If you have a crystal-based radio, do not ever turn your radio on unless you have taken the frequency clip that matches the frequency of your transmitter and receiver. You wouldn't want somebody else to accidentally wreck your car by turning on his or her radio while you're on the track, so make sure not to do it to somebody else. After you're done with a run, immediately return the frequency clip to the board so that anybody who is waiting for it can have their turn. You don't want to become known as the one who always keeps the frequency clips!

2. **Transponders** – Transponders are the identifiers that the computer scoring system uses to track the cars' progress on the track. Before you go out for a qualifier or race, you'll need to have a transponder in your car. Most tracks will have some sort of transponder to loan out to you, and it's expected that immediately following a race you'll return your transponder to its charging station. The transponders have to be charged in between races to keep them functional, so it's very important to return them immediately. Later on you may want to buy a personal transponder for your own use, so you don't have to worry about this.
3. **Don't Make a Mess** – Working on your RC cars can be messy business, and you are always expected to clean up after yourself. If you need to use motor spray or dump out shock oil, do it over a wastebasket (preferably outdoors) so you don't mess up the facility. If you open parts bags or end up with a broken part or two, make sure to throw them away instead of just leaving the remnants laying around for others to clean up. You are always the one responsible for leaving your pit area as clean as when you arrived, if not cleaner.
4. **Be Friendly, Be Helpful** – One of the best things about this (or really any) hobby is sharing information and tips with others who are enjoying the same thing. After you've been at the track a few times, it's likely that somebody will ask your advice about something. Even if you are busy or in a hurry, try to be as friendly and courteous as possible. If you don't know the answer, suggest somebody who does know. The more friends you make, the more fun you'll have, and the more help you'll get in return.

Conclusion

See, it doesn't sound so bad now, does it? Just by reading this guide, you're well on your way to becoming a grizzled old track denizen. Now that you have gotten this far, it's time to hit the track! Even if you don't plan on becoming a serious racer, take your car or truck down and turn some laps — you just might like it more than you thought you would.

(Special thanks to the Colorado On-Road RC Club!)

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