

Whether you love them or hate them, racing message boards are playing a major role in racing today.

Prior to internet message boards, racers and fans were forced to save most of their racing talk for the occasional phone call to a fellow race fan, a chance meeting in public or hanging out in race shops. Being away from the track used to mean limited talk about racing.

Today, however, message boards have given racers and fans unlimited opportunities to discuss their favorite sport with like-minded individuals. One doesn't even have to attend the race in order to participate in discussions online 24 hours per day, 365 days per year. Results for events are posted on message boards, in many instances, quicker than the information is available from the track or series. News of on-track activity and results is oftentimes posted from laptops at the track while the race is running. It's the age of instant information.

PeelMeOffTheWallNY. Crowbar. OldTimer. Black Sheep. Dr. Evil. Visit any racing-related message board these days and these are the types of "handles" you are likely to see. Some people hide behind their handles, not revealing their real names nor providing their e-mail addresses. In some cases, these anonymous board posters turn out to be real troublemakers, as they often make provocative and wildly untrue statements and are then able to hide behind their anonymity. Other posters use their real names as their handle or, even with a clever handle name, still let everyone know who they are and how they can be reached.

On OutsideGroove.com, a popular Vermont-based message board covering ACT, Thunder Road, CVRA, NASCAR and other racing, a longtime poster under an anonymous handle recently "outed" himself by revealing his true identity. This poster had caused a lot of discussion and a fair number of very heated arguments due to both his statements and speculation as to his real name. He also made sure that a certain series would most likely never have his driver and team come back again.

Many visitors to message boards are "lurkers", meaning they never post any messages but instead only read what other people are writing. One message board operator estimates that for every 1 person who is a regular poster on the board there are at least 8 lurkers who never post at all.

ACT and Thunder Road leader Tom Curley is both a message board lurker and a board opponent, having gone so far as saying in a published interview that "...internet chat rooms are a runaway destructive aspect of the short-track race business."

It is easy to see why Curley would not be a fan of such sites. With a popular series in The American Canadian Tour and a legendary racetrack in the form of Barre, VT's Thunder Road Speedbowl, Tom Curley generates a lot of publicity. With that publicity come the opinions, both good and bad, of how he is running things. After any given event the boards come alive, pointing out both his successes and also any of his perceived mistakes.

It is hard for a track and/or series owner to have public critiquing of their work, especially when there does not even need to be a shred of proof to back up online posts. Says Tom Curley, "I don't mind taking a beating [on message boards], but when the facts are just totally wrong it really does nothing but show how ignorant some people can be."

Race writer Big Bigelow of The Caledonian Records says "I know right where Tom is coming from. He has poured his heart and soul into racing for 30 plus years. But as hard as he works there is always someone bitching about something - and that's just hard to swallow. No one likes to get bitched at after working so hard on something."

Several track operators, like Bruce Richards of Albany-Saratoga and Devil's Bowl and Dick Therrien of Riverside Speedway in NH, have become proactive with their use of racing message boards. Rather than wait for rumors to start on the boards, promoters like Dick and Bruce are posting news and correcting disinformation regularly through their posts. Knowing that these track operators are reading what is said, and that they are willing to correct inaccuracies, seems to keep the wild speculation to a minimum. It also gives posters the opportunity to post questions for these track operators and have them answered in a public forum.

The power of message boards was recently proven when a thread on OutsideGroove.com meandered from a post about Kevin Harvick coming to the Oxford 250 to a heated discussion of ACT crate motors and whether or not their prices were grossly inflated. Suggestions that ACT marks up the price of their crate

motors and makes a hefty profit became so widespread that Big Bigelow of The Caledonian Record published an interview with ACT President Tom Curley in order to dispute the claim.

There are many who think that any talk of racing, be it gossip or fact, is a good thing. The theory is that “any publicity is good publicity.” There is some truth to this theory. Dale Earnhardt Sr. is credited with saying that whether fans are cheering or booing a driver, at least they are making noise. The worst thing a driver can hear at driver introductions is absolutely nothing. Silence, said Dale Sr., means fans don’t have any interest in you.

The same can be argued for race tracks and series. Whether the internet chatter is good or bad, at least people are talking. When there are no posts in a week that deal with a particular track or series, perhaps then is it time to worry.

For a message board moderator, it is a delicate balance between allowing for freedom of speech and keeping their board from promoting slander. Or dealing with posters who are being just plain irritating. Eric LaFleche, who owns and operates VictoryLaneForum.com, recently dealt with a poster who managed to tick off a lot of other posters. The same poster also sparked discussion on OutsideGroove.com where it was debated what grounds are appropriate for kicking someone off a board.

OutsideGroove.com guru Gene Gagne said that he had only banned 4 people on the site in the last two years. One was for saying things about other posters wives, the second one posted 8 posts and all 8 were posted just to start wars, the third was a kid who said something dumb but was unbanned a day or two later and the last was for spamming the classifieds even though he was told not to, but he was let back on after a week.

Ultimately, Gene says, “OutsideGroove.com is NOT a democracy, it is a dictatorship. It’s kinda like if I ask you to come to my house, you might be a bit of a pain in the ass but I am the one who tells you to leave. If I set the precedent of banning someone due to public outcry of a few vocal members, who would be their next target? We have plenty of people here that annoy others just because.”

Besides posters just being irritating, though, a message board and/or particular posters being sued for what they say is not without legal precedent. Unlike comments made orally, posts on message boards are readily available as part of the public record. Barring removal by the board moderator, what someone posts is a permanent part of internet history. Even people who use anonymous handles are traceable through their computer's IP address and other information that is known to the moderator.

Gene Gagne of OutsideGroove.com says "Internet libel cases most always protect the board owners, as it is not our job to police content unless we choose to." Still, a good moderator knows when to pull the plug on a given conversation. The ability to lock a thread, remove particular posts and even bar a poster from the site lets the moderator maintain a certain level of conduct on their site.

Whatever your favorite race track, series or type of car there is more than likely a message board that covers the racing that interests you. Besides chat sections of many boards, there are also separate sections for technical assistance, classifieds, member photos and even non-racing discussions.

With all of their pros and cons, whether you like them or not, message boards are not going away. Even with a certain level of disinformation, they still provide a place where race fans can talk about racing any time they want. As stated at the beginning of the OutsideGroove.com message board, "The boards can only be what you make of them. Make some friends, have some fun, get into some friendly debates, post links to things you think other people might find interesting, etc. Feel free to post what you want within common decency. Please don't bash drivers unless you're prepared to take as well as you give. But most of all, ENJOY!"