

How many times in your racing career has your track owner or series director made you breakfast? Unless you're a member of Tom Curley's American Canadian Tour Crew Chiefs Club, the answer is probably "none".

On a very foggy Sunday morning, Tom Curley is serving breakfast for about a dozen ACT crew chiefs. Three times earlier in the season the group had met for a race day breakfast at a local restaurant to discuss matters of racing. This time, though, things were different. "The restaurant we used to meet at went out of business" Tom says. "Because I wanted to fulfill my commitment to those that had been to all of the breakfasts, I cooked for the guys at my house."

There are certainly other things on Tom's mind on this particular day, Milk Bowl Sunday 2008. He has managed to make it through Saturday's racing events on a day when the weather forecast was bad enough that other tracks cancelled their weekend events on Friday. The forecast for Sunday is even worse. There are countless details for the day that Tom could be working on. Instead, he has cooked for nearly two hours and is now sitting down to talk shop with the crew chiefs of his beloved late model tour.

While the club became "official" in 2008, it had been developing over the years. "The club actually started quite a few years ago when I was working the tire compound at the beginning of each tour race" says Curley. "I realized just how pleasant it was to start the race day with the crew chiefs. I had time to chat with almost all of them and got a sense of what was good about the 'attitude' of the tour. As a group, they seemed to convey things to me without having ego issues or the 'you screwed me on that call two years ago' kinds of issues that a guy in my position is exposed to. I could usually sense various concerns and that was a perfect 'alarm system' for working things out that needed to be fixed. I came away with the feeling that this was a great group. I felt, and still do, that as a group they are the best barometer of what is right about ACT. What they say doesn't require sifting through the baggage of ownership bias or driver paranoia. Don't get me wrong, there is certainly a place for input from both owners and drivers, but on a daily basis it is great to be able to pick up the phone and get some advice from one of the crew chiefs. Whether it be a rules issue, handicap problem, scheduling issue or a myriad of other things that we talk about, I always feel they shoot straight with me and I never get the feeling they only have their private interests at hand."

The breakfast meetings serve many purposes. "I generally give the guys a little early instruction on anything that might be pertinent like weather, tech issues, possible tech memos coming out, the philosophy of future that I would like them to think about and give me some feedback on, etc." says Curley. "But the main purpose is just to thank them for the hours and dedication they put in. I feel a need for them to know that I appreciate their efforts on behalf of the business. They are indeed the unsung heroes of the sport, in my opinion."

There are other benefits to the breakfast meetings, Curley thinks. "If I can get the key guy on some of the race teams relaxed and have 30-45 minutes of sitting with the people he is about

to do battle with, I think it sets a positive atmosphere for the day. My hope is that this will rub off on his race team. Hopefully there will be support from others in the fraternity if the day goes bad and genuine positive feelings for each other if the day goes well.”

Crew Chief Pete Potvin Jr. agrees. “It's a very relaxing time that really sets the tone of the day for me” he says. “It puts me in a positive mood that I can carry to my team. The opportunity to get together and discuss procedures for the day, upcoming matters, or just sharing each other's thoughts makes it nice. It's a great time to get to know each other better since we all know it's hard once we get to the track. I think it's a great thing Tom has started and hope that he keeps it up. The involvement we are allowed to have can only make this series stronger in the future.”

The club's work is not confined to just breakfast meetings, though. A handful of meetings during the season has turned into during-the-week and off-season contact as well. “I call crew chiefs for advice” says Curley. “I think they feel comfortable calling me, too, with concerns they might want to discuss.”

Curley thinks that being a part of the club is a great benefit for crew chiefs. “I would guess the most important thing is the rules” Curley says. “The feeling of having a say in making up sensible rules with fellow crew chiefs provides a very balanced playing field for good rule making and enforcement. If one crew chief thinks we should have a new ‘whatever’ in 2009, but he hears differing opinions from some of his peers instead of just the established management (ACT), it provides a much better atmosphere for getting things done in a positive way for the good of racing.”

The club has been popular with the ACT crew chiefs. “I believe the most we had at any one meeting was around 35 crew chiefs” Curley says. Having such a large number of participants increases the amount of opinions and input to the discussion. It also increases the importance of the group.

Without a doubt, the club has had a definite influence on the function of the tour. “Many of the tire and handicap changes have come about as a result of crew chief input” Curley says. “The number of events scheduled over the past couple years has, for the most part, come from my meetings with crew chiefs. We also discuss policy and procedural things, from double file restarts to what concerns there may be about things like 'open competition Late Model racing' in our region. We talk about schedules, longer races, having some races with tire changes allowed, how to better enforce soaking, how to have a more effective impound of tires...the list really is endless. Various rules either being introduced or eliminated have come directly from discussions with the crew chiefs.”

Beyond providing a forum for crew chiefs to share, it is also important that a promoter truly listens to what the crew chiefs have to say. “I have no doubt that if a consensus of crew chiefs point out a deficiency within our management structure, it is probably 99% accurate and should

be changed or at least looked into very seriously” says Curley. “This is not just personnel, but with systems, procedures, rules etc. A group of dedicated, passionate crew chiefs are the ultimate 'sounding board' in my opinion.”

Curley's only regret with the concept is that he didn't think of it sooner. “I regret that I did not think of this structure many, many years ago” he says. “I suspect my work in this field of race promotion and management would have not only been easier, but a whole lot more fun. I know I would have ended up with a lot more friends in the business.”

The club continues year-round as one racing season is reviewed and another is planned for. “During the 'off-season' we have a couple of invited meetings” Curley says. “We discuss the upcoming season over pizza and beer and work out what issues we see on the horizon. I ask for their input on procedures like practice schedules, inspection procedures, pulling engines, tire impounding needs, etc. Not everything is implemented, but much will be.”

And what is Curley's advice for track or series directors thinking of starting their own crew chiefs club? “I think that having a crew chiefs club is a great asset for promoters” he says. “The trick is to have a wide variety of crew chiefs. I believe it will only work if it is a diverse group. Big teams, middle teams and small teams all need to be included with all of them being vocal and with equal opportunity and comfort to be involved in the discussions. The key here is to listen and respect that the crew chiefs offer ways to improve the business from a vantage point that most promoters and organizers are unfamiliar with. You need to have faith in what they are telling you. It takes a little time to gain trust on both sides (crew chief and management) but it is well worth it.”