

My Quest for Master Model Railroader

My 2nd AP Certificate: Chief Dispatcher

article and photographs by Jim Wanlass

I have always liked building things, but as a kid, I had a hard time keeping my trains running with the old steel track and poor pickups on the locomotives. As a teenager, I enjoyed building RC cars and running them but hated having to wait so long to charge up the batteries. As train tracks improved, and I got better at laying the tracks and could afford better locomotives, I really enjoyed seeing the trains run. There are at least two reasons I prefer model trains over RC cars: There are more things to build, from benchwork to buildings, and the trains can run continuously without needing to take a break. I still like RC cars, but there is something very satisfying about watching trains roll by.

In my first article (January 2017), I mentioned how I initially considered myself a lone wolf modeler, so Chief Dispatcher was another AP Certificate I did not anticipate earning, especially not as my second one! One of the local meetings I attended while still living in California had a replica of John Allen's Timesaver game. At the NMRA National Convention three years earlier, I had video-recorded Allan Fenton explaining the game on one of John Allen's original Timesavers that was saved from the fire at his house that destroyed most of his work after he had passed away. I didn't get a chance to try it that first time, but I incor-

porated the idea into the shelf layout I was building. Being able to practice the concept of switching moves on my little layout gave me an advantage when I showed up at the meeting I hadn't planned on attending. At that meeting, I completed the game faster than the man running it had ever seen a beginner complete it. Adding a car made it more difficult, but I still earned third place among that group! About ten years later, I finally made my own, which I now take with me to help teach the Railroading Merit Badge and other activities. You can read more about this specifically at www.JamestownTrains.com/timesaver.

Around eight or nine years ago, I discovered that someone only ten minutes from my house had a basement full of trains! I met him and even took a private tour of his awesome model railroad empire! I was invited back when he held his next "Operating Session," where we ran the trains in a realistic manner. I'm sure I had heard about such events before but had never witnessed one in action. I was a little nervous when I showed up and said I would just watch to see how it worked. No, I was put to work! I couldn't believe we got to play with, I mean run trains, like they were the real thing for more than four hours, and I loved every minute! That would normally be a long time to be away from my young

family, but it just so happened that they were out of town that weekend, so it all worked out. That same opportunity didn't present itself again for a long time.

About four years ago, our Division started a new group called Division Operations Group, otherwise known as D.O.G. Over the years, I had learned a little more about groups operating on some of the local layouts, but it was hard just to get started in a new group. Showing up with very little knowledge about operating model railroads can be very intimidating. Most groups have their regular operators and often can't fit someone new in, or it can be difficult to "show them the ropes" and delegate responsibilities long held by others. The way the D.O.G.s started out is a bunch of brand-new operators showed up at a layout where a few of the regulars were also there. The regulars show the new guys what to do and then roam around, helping and giving advice to those who need it. We were mostly all new, so there was no need to be intimidated! Everyone was very patient, and I even heard someone say that the D.O.G.s did better than the regular crew! I think we were a little nervous and wanted to get things just right.

At the first couple of D.O.G.s ops sessions, I didn't even want to break for lunch. I was having so much fun that I just wanted to keep running the trains. Taking a break and relaxing with fellow crewmembers and getting to know them better, however, is also a part of operations that can easily be overlooked. Yes, you are "working a job" on the railroad, but it's for fun. However, be careful to not socialize to the point that you're annoying those wanting to continue their work. Having a crew lounge is important, and taking breaks, when appropriate, is good. Be respectful of everyone, especially the layout owners. Be patient, don't take yourself too seriously, and have fun.

Another benefit of D.O.G.s is that we rotate to different layouts in the area. This is great because then we can learn dif-



ferent ways to run the railroads. I think each of the layouts we operate on has a different dispatching style, which gives us more experience in the way it can be done. The layouts are mostly HO scale, but there are a couple of N scale ones too, which bring about a different set of challenges. Magnifying glasses are provided. Seriously! In addition, each layout uses a different type of control system, and it is interesting to get unique perspectives on why each system is a favorite.

So, let's get back to the Chief Dispatcher AP Certificate. Belonging to the D.O.G.s didn't make it automatic for me to get the Certificate. So far, I'm the only one in the group who has it, but I plan on assisting others to get theirs. Part of the challenge is

All photos: A benefit of operating sessions is working with other model railroaders and learning from their experiences. The D.O.G.s (Division Operations Group) of the Northern Utah Division operate on several layouts, including different scales, dispatching, and control systems. The 2019 NMRA National Convention will be held in Salt Lake City, Utah, where you will have an opportunity to operate on these same layouts (www.nmra2019slc.org/2).



the intimidation you feel when you haven't been a Dispatcher much, and the Certificate requires at least ten hours in that position. I focused my dispatching time on the same layout, so I could be familiar enough with it to do a good job. I wanted more time on this layout, so I got on the regular crew call and operated on it more. Someone assisted me at first, but by the end, I basically did it myself.

Another aspect of earning the Certificate is recording the hours you spend at each position. I found it easy to have a clipboard with me. After a session, I would record the position and get the layout owner to initial it. Something else I found helpful was contacting the layout owner ahead of time. When I had enough hours in one area but needed them in a specific category, I asked for a preference when it came time to picking jobs. He put it to the group, and

when they knew why I was asking, no one had an issue. Eventually, with the help of others, I accumulated enough hours in all the required categories.

The next step was to complete the paperwork. Like I said, we operated on several layouts, but there was one in particular on which I spent more time. I asked the owner specific questions about how and why he did certain things to get a better understanding of his "system." When I needed to create the diagrams and supporting materials, I followed his process closely and combined it with what I imagined my future layout might be like. It is one thing to show up at someone's house and run their trains and quite another to understand how they are run. There is nothing wrong with the first option, but the second provides a deeper understanding of the process. By studying several different layouts, I could better envision what I wanted to do for my layout when I'm ready.

As I've heard many times before, don't read more into the requirements than are there, and keep it simple. I had a hard time getting started with the paperwork, but once I did, it all came together nicely. I was

actually surprised to find out that many people have this Certificate in other areas of the country, but as far as I can tell, I am the first in the state of Utah to get it! I'm sure many people in the D.O.G.s have enough hours but maybe not in all the required categories. Nor have they completed the required timetables and charts. I suggest getting with someone, either in person or online, to help you if you are not familiar with that part. Now that I have done it, I will probably do a clinic or a special D.O.G. session so that more people in my area can earn it.

Even though the Certificate is named "Chief Dispatcher" and time was spent in the dispatching position, I do not consider myself an expert by any means. I learned that different things need to be done when operating a model railroad and some are more fun for me than others — people definitely have their favorites. I do think, like the other Certificates, the Chief Dispatcher expands your experiences in model railroading and offers a better sense of another area of the hobby that you might not have thought about before. By gaining that knowledge and helping others along the way, we can enjoy the journey together! 🚂

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