

LAP 40—THE “START”

Every driver knows green means go. We learn at an early age green means “go,” yellow means “caution,” and red means “stop.” All our lives these simple commands have a profound effect on our driving but it’s the fun flag, the green flag or “go” we’re going to talk about this lap. Whether driving an open track event or outright racing, the green flag is the indicator that the track is clear and you’re good to explore the limits of your Mustang. With the summer driving season here, many Mustang owners will be taking to the track for the first time and need to understand the green flag.

Everybody loves the start of a race, the excitement of hearing engines roar, and the cars accelerate while negotiating for position when entering the first turn. Sometimes it seems impossible for everyone to make it through, especially considering the close proximity, cold tires, and untested brakes. Usually everyone makes it through turn 1 but sometimes they don’t, your job is to keep it clean because to win you have to finish the race. One of the most misunderstood items in road racing is the green flag given to a rolling start. Let’s explain what’s supposed to happen and then share some of the common problems.

After qualifying, the fastest car—the “pole sitter”—selects whether they want the left or right side of the grid. This is advantageous depending on if turn 1 is left or right handed. After exiting the hot pits the field follows the pace car around the track while the pole sitter takes note of the pace car speed. It’s the pole sitter’s sole responsibility to maintain this pace for the field as the pace car exits the track prior to the green flag. By the time the pace car exits the track the field should be in two straight parallel lines, tightly grouped and all traveling at the same speed, which was set by the pace car and maintained by the pole sitter. The field maintains this pace because the pole sitter holds their speed until the green flag drops and the race begins. No acceleration is allowed by the pole sitter from the time the pace car exits the track until the green flag drops. The starter has the call because if the field is accelerating or if it’s not tightly grouped the green flag should withheld and the field must try again for a good start on the next lap. It is important to understand the field earns the right to a green flag only when maintaining pace, forming two straight lines, and holding position.

At our last race event we experienced serious turn 1 incidents during three of four race starts due primarily to pre-acceleration by the pole sitter. This creates a very dangerous situation by stringing out the field, which can result in an accordion effect when the starter holds the green flag to tighten up the field. This occurs because the front of the field accelerates anticipating the green and then decelerates when it is not shown causing those cars further back to accelerate right into the rear of the field. This is why the pace car sets a slow pace, so that cars don’t

get strung out and if they do the closing speed is so low there is plenty of time to react. This is precisely what happened in 2005 at Road America during the Brian Redmond International Challenge. In my case, the starter did the right thing and held back the green flag forcing the field to go around which resulted in a clean start finally, during our 4<sup>th</sup> race start.

Two of the more common problems during race starts involve falling back to create more space between you and the car ahead and not staying directly behind the car you’re following. Falling back is done to create space to be used for acceleration in anticipation of the green flag. This is a bad idea and the reason the starter is looking for a tight field before giving the green. Not staying in line directly behind the car ahead creates another problem because you’re essentially blocking the cars behind even before the race begins. Blocking is essentially two defensive moves made by the lead car in an attempt to gain

or retain an advantage. You don’t want to be known as a blocker, it’s not something to be proud of.

Try to pace yourself after taking the green and give the car time to settle into a rhythm. Many times during a race the pack forms into two or three groups with cars of similar speed racing each other. Beware of the hard-charging car that gridded at the back because of poor qualifying time but normally runs up front. The driver most

likely needs to get around you quickly before the lead pack separates far enough to be out of reach. This is a common occurrence on tracks with wide front straights like Texas World Speedway, where four and even five wide are possible. Watch your mirrors!

I’ve seen many incidents from the driver’s seat during race starts. A 1966 Shelby roll after missing turn 1, a Boss302 drop a driveshaft and spit it across the track while miraculously missing every car, and I even saw one driver almost take out one of those large football shaped Ford logo balloons on the first lap. Once, I even stepped hard on the brake TWICE instead of the clutch when making an up-shift on the race start. Talk about scattering the field behind you, try stomping hard on the brake while performing a 2-3 up-shift during a race start. That won’t make you any friends! Fortunately the driver behind me was a very experienced SCCA GT1 racer and missed me.

Charlie Jones, a.k.a.

Roadracer



**“WHETHER DRIVING AN OPEN TRACK EVENT OR OUTRIGHT RACING, THE GREEN FLAG IS THE INDICATOR THAT THE TRACK IS CLEAR AND YOU’RE GOOD TO EXPLORE THE LIMITS OF YOUR MUSTANG.”**