

Is Traction Control Outrunning You?

Crew chief Ronnie Stuckey is a freelancer, which means he works with a lot of different race teams on many levels, from local weekend warriors to full-time professionals.

In that capacity, he's had plenty of experience with traction control units, both in reality and in theory. We talked to Stuckey to get his take on the place of traction control in Late Model racing.

"Everybody's shop that you go into, one of their main topics they want to discuss is traction control," Stuckey said. "It seems that every racer is convinced that the guy that's outrunning him is using traction control. But then, you can go to the other guy's shop and find out that he thinks he's being outrun by traction control too.

"And sometimes, neither one of them is using it."

So is the effectiveness of traction control as much psychological as it is real? Is the perception reality?

"Everybody who thinks they're being outrun by traction control, feels like they have to have it on their car," Stuckey explained. "If you don't run well with it, you can turn around and sell it. But, mentally, you've got to know whether that's what you're being beat by.

"A lot of the good drivers have bought it, and a lot of them have sold it when they've seen that they don't need it. But until you have it and put it on your car, you're going to always feel like you're getting outrun by it.

Traction control has been a hot topic the past few seasons, and at times it seems everybody is using it or, at the least, worrying about it. Still, Stuckey says that "there are a lot of teams that haven't tried [traction control] and don't want to try it, because they think they can race without it."

How widespread is the use of traction control? "As for the number of Late Model guys out there who have it, I'd say it probably approaches half the field," he said. "I'd say that on the series that have spec tires and eight-inch spoilers, it's probably two-thirds of the field.

by Tim Lee

So what are the advantages of traction control? "In certain conditions, there's no advantage in having one," Stuckey said. "If you're going to race every week on a track that stays a little hooked up, wet, muddy, with traction, a little rough, it's probably not an advantage to have one.

"But if you're going to run on a track that gets any kind of dry-slick, black, with spec tires, then there's no doubt that it has its advantages. And the biggest advantage has got to be tire wear. No wheel-spin equals no heat in the tire. And no heat in the tire helps get you through the last ten or twenty laps of the feature when everybody else's tires are giving up."

According to Stuckey, traction control units are not the "magic ticket" to victory lane that legend has built them up to be. "What we've seen is that, if you've got a guy who's two seconds off the pace, you can put one of these in his car and it might bring him within a second, but it's not going to make him go to the front," he said. "It's not going to be the magic ticket to make him go from eighth to first."

But, he added, "If you're running third, and you leave your car a little too free, you might can run third with it. Without it, you might start third and you're a little too free, you might finish fifth.

"Now, whether the two guys who passed you have it, I don't know. But it's always in the back of your mind that they had it. So you're going to be willing to go out and buy one so you can finish third. And sometimes, if you can finish third a few times instead of falling back to fifth, that money might come back to you pretty quickly."

As for policing traction control, Stuckey feels that the more sanctioning bodies have tried to crack down on its use, the smaller (and thus more expensive) the units have become. "The more they've tried to police it, the smaller the units have gotten and



the more expensive they've gotten," he said of the units that generally cost anywhere from \$4,000 to \$8,000 for something that will fit in the palm of your hand. "I'm not sure that if, a few years ago when they first came out, that if everybody had just gotten one, the price would have stayed low."

Regardless of the seemingly high price, Stuckey says that, when put into perspective, it really might not be as bad as it's made out to be. "The little bit of money you spend on that isn't that much," he explained. "Our tire bills are bigger than that. Our wheel bills are bigger than that. We spend more on transmissions. Our motor prices are way up there.

"The units that fit in an ignition box cost around \$4,000. And four grand isn't a bad price to help us go fast. We spend \$3,000 on a set of shocks to help us go fast, so \$4,000 for a little electronic ignition doesn't seem bad either."