

# SHANNON DAVIS

## A CANDID INTERVIEW WITH MR. TRACTION CONTROL

by Justin Zoch

The telephone message at Davis Technologies ends like this: "All calls will remain confidential." I left my name and number and felt sort of strange. Should I be doing this? Is this wrong? Will anyone know? I suppose the sensation is similar to sneaking into a ballgame or buying drugs.

As a journalist scooping a story, I quickly realized I had no retribution to sweat. However, one wonders how a driver feels after leaving a message. Traction control, while obviously a legal product in the eyes of the government, is expressly illegal in some series and eyed with intense scrutiny throughout the sport. Getting caught won't get you outfitted in an orange jumpsuit, but it will get you blacklisted in the racing community, perhaps a lengthy suspension, and will get you solidly into the history books as the first Sprint driver to be busted in the age of awareness.

Traction control is not necessarily new to Sprint Cars, but the controversy surrounding it has put the issue to the forefront. *FlatOut* recently went straight to the source, Shannon Davis of Davis Technologies, for straight talk about traction control. While Davis' product may make him one of the most notorious men in the sport, the list of drivers who call him friend should elicit more anger.

**FlatOut:** This may seem like an odd question, but the term "traction control" has taken on a life of its own. So, to your mind, what is it?

**Shannon Davis:** Traction control, in the literal sense, has to have some form of determining traction, which is usually the front wheel speed. The sensors sense when there is a loss of



traction. It happens when the back wheels are going faster than the front wheels. It shouldn't be doing that. Retarding the timing is a way of doing it that you don't hear when done properly and shouldn't harm the motor. The downside of that is that you can only change the horsepower so much, maybe ten to fifteen percent, without hearing it.

**FlatOut:** How did you get started building traction control units?

**Davis:** I designed my first unit in 1997. I got into out of necessity, because it was all over the road racing series that I was involved in. We went looking for it on the market, weren't satisfied and built our own. One thing led to another, I started doing them for my friends and their friends and off they went. I'd always been a racer, but I had to learn the electronics.

**FlatOut:** In the past six months, traction control has been all the rage in Sprint Cars. Is it new to the sport?

**Davis:** It started out mostly in asphalt and then everybody wondered if it would work on dirt, and it worked on the Dirt

(above) Shannon Davis isn't ashamed of the products he builds, but he doesn't exactly want to be a public figure either. Davis prefers to keep his appearance anonymous so that every driver seen chatting him up or fraternizing with him at a racetrack is not immediately blackballed. By selling a product that most series consider competitive contraband, Davis has opened himself up to public scrutiny.

Late Model cars. One of my dealers decided that he wanted to try it on a Sprint Car. We had to customize it a little bit for that type of racing and those ignitions. Once someone gets one, the talk starts, the rumors start and business picks up.

**FlatOut:** What do you say to people who say that it won't work on a Sprint Car because they are too light? Or has too much horsepower?

**Davis:** Everybody wants to believe that it won't work on a car that is slipping and sliding and that is not the case. Let's just say, for instance, that you want the car to slip ten percent, you don't want it to jump up to twenty percent. You want a constant rate of acceleration. You can't use all the horsepower in the corner. You can use it once you get the car straightened out and hooked up. But, early in the corners, it is just too much horsepower.

**FlatOut:** I've also heard it argued that it is too expensive. What is your response to that?

**Davis:** The cost is negligible; our top of the line unit is \$7,500. It will last at

least five years and it really isn't a big cost. The money argument is kind of ridiculous, because no one saves money when they go racing. The racers aren't concerned with the money. They are concerned with getting caught cheating. We've never, to my knowledge, had anybody get caught with our device. These guys just don't want to get caught with it and get their name drug through the mud.

**FlatOut:** Do you think that it ruins the racing?

**Davis:** It has got to the point where the cars are capable of outperforming what the human driver can do. For instance, a human couldn't fly a fighter jet without the computers. It cannot happen. Everyone thinks this stuff takes away from the racing and it doesn't. I have a unique perspective because I know the guys that are running it.

From a racer's standpoint, it makes for better racing. There is nothing worse than watching one guy win week after week. It makes the field tighter and it takes out the guys spinning at the back every few laps. It just helps everyone get off the corner better. The fast guys

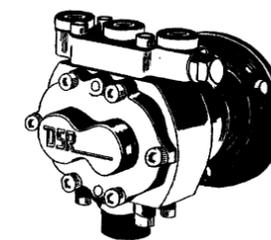
will gain more from this than the slower guys. If you give a guy at the top a ten percent better race car, he'll go ten percent faster and a guy in the middle will go three percent faster. But, it does tighten the field and eliminates the guys running two laps down.

Part of the fun of watching Formula One is because it is so technologically advanced. It isn't good racing. One of the Schumachers is going to go out there and have the lead in five seconds. They don't pass. It isn't fun to watch them race, but the machines are neat. In big time Stock Car racing, if they made traction control legal, it would be a bad thing. If we allow pure traction control, with sensors and computers all over the car to control all the horsepower available, you can just put it to the floor and the computer will take care of it. In our system, the guy still has to drive the car. It helps maybe ten to fifteen percent. One analogy they tell you in driving school is to drive like you have an egg between the throttle and your foot. With our stuff, it is kind of like having a boiled egg.

**FlatOut:** Can you tell if someone is running it if you don't know?

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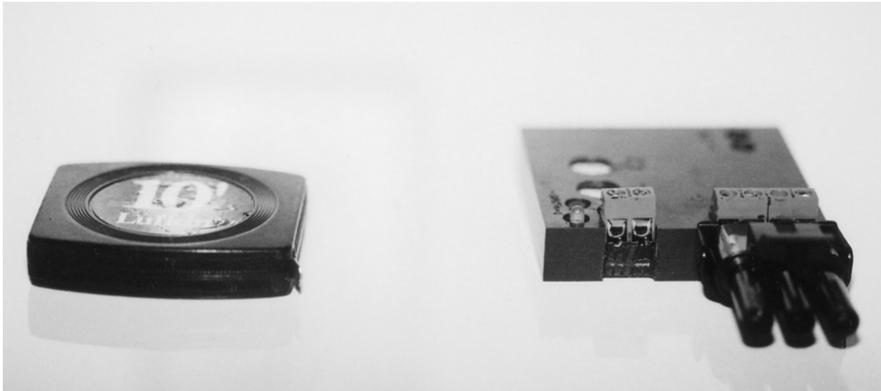
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One of the sample units that are currently being implemented. The size in relation to a small tape measure shows how discreetly the device can be hidden. Most likely, however, the new technology has already advanced beyond this stage. As the hunt continues, the effort to make the devices smaller and smaller will continue as well.

**Davis:** Not particularly. The best thing I've found to watch is their front wheels or their hands on the steering wheel. If they're sawing on the wheel, they're sawing on the throttle. Sometimes in qualifying, you think you can hear the difference, but not all the time. Some guys just go too far with them and they take out too much horsepower and then you can tell. But, mostly, you just have to watch the cars.

**FlatOut:** So, do you think they should make it legal? What should they do about it?  
**Davis:** If they made it legal, sales would go way up but the cost would come way down. But, I'd rather they didn't. It might make for better racing, and we might get more fans because we won't have the constant argument that whoever won was cheating. If they are all on the same playing field, it's fair. In



ROGER GREENKAMP

Jack Hewitt (left) was named as the All Star Circuit of Champions Competition Director in early 2003 and has since made it his mission to find traction control. Hewitt has spearheaded the effort by removing tachs from the cockpits, making it the lead topic of conversation in driver's meetings and by forming the Traction Control Coalition. This is a membership of nearly twenty clubs, open wheel and stock car, that have joined together to enforce uniform penalties for drivers caught using it.

Sprint Cars, power steering was illegal fifteen years ago. Now, you wouldn't think of showing up without it. It is just the natural progression of racing, but it doesn't mean that we have to outfit the cars with ground speed radar, brake actuators and things that cut cylinders out on command. I don't want to watch a race where the guy can't spin the car out with the throttle. For instance, you won't see a Formula One guy spin his car out coming off the corner. They might do it coming in, but they won't do it going out.

**FlatOut:** Why do you think it has become an issue this year?  
**Davis:** It started showing up in the results on the track. Everybody was hollering about the winners using traction control. Well, if you think you got beat by traction control on Saturday night, you get on the internet on Sunday and find out where to get some. When they talk about banning someone from a series for life, these guys think, 'It must really work or they wouldn't be this

worried about it.' If these guys believe they are getting beat by traction control, they're going to get it. Most guys have seen it for years and they see everyone else getting away with it. At the PRI show last year, I was flagged down by about a thousand people, and I wasn't even there officially. I was there selling distributor machines and all these people came by and tracked me down at that booth. One of the biggest names in racing came up to me and said, 'Man, I bought of these things last year and it changed my racing career. This thing works. It's not a miracle, but it works. It will get you in the hunt.' And, then he walked away.

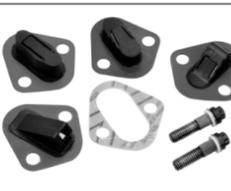
## WORLD OF OUTLAWS COMPETITION DIRECTOR BOBBY JACKSON ON TRACTION CONTROL

**FlatOut:** What is your position on Traction Control?  
**Bobby Jackson:** I'm not naive enough to believe that some of these guys haven't tried it. Danny Lasoski tried it last year at Lakeside and ran it at Eagle. But, that was when it was legal. It wasn't against the rules then. Those guys that I know have had it in Sprint Cars have taken it off. In Late Models, there are some guys that are still running it, but even some of those guys are starting to take it off. Daryn Pittman had it three years ago and took it off. Dave Blaney had it seven years ago and took it off. Those guys have told me that on a Sprint Car, it's no good because when you need to throttle it to turn it, you have no power. Wheel spin in a Sprint Car is still advantageous over no wheel spin, to a certain point. Another guy I know had one, but he sent it back because he burnt two motors up. It is really hard to fuel them.

**FlatOut:** How have the World of Outlaws tried to stop it?  
**Jackson:** We've looked at some things. There is talk that it can be in the tachs. We've pulled some of those off and looked at them. There are indications, such as an additional wire within the tach and the MSD box, that point to whether it has been tampered with. The difference between a Sprint Car and a Late Model or a Winston Cup car is that we don't have batteries. The only place to power it is through a nine-volt battery and the only nine-volt battery in a Sprint Car is in the tach. Who knows how these guys are powering it? But, there has to be a tell-tale sign.

**FlatOut:** Since you don't feel it is advantageous, have you considered making it legal?  
**Jackson:** My philosophy was just to make it legal, because I figured it would resolve itself that way. My only concern was that everyone was going to have to spend \$7,500 to find out for themselves that it wasn't any good. But, at the same time, I don't like having rules that I can't be one hundred percent sure we can enforce. I honestly can't tell you that we can do that right now. These guys are good. Formula One and CART have \$200 an hour engineers working on these things and they can't really stop it.

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