

# CARSIDE MANNER



Years ago, when trying out for an outfield position on a pony league team, I was chasing after a high fly ball. Since the infielder had run back to catch it, I called him off screaming, "I got it, I got it!"

My grammar and my outfield skills were about equal. Glancing down at the oncoming infielder at the last moment, I took my eye off the ball. As the ball crashed into my thick German skull raising a dandy knot, the coach was heard to mumble, "He ain't got it."

Coach wasn't big on grammar either. But when it came to baseball, he stressed the basics, and the importance of practicing the same fundamentals over and over again until they became second nature. Keeping your eye on the ball meant more than protecting the old noggin from the hurtling horsehide. It meant paying attention—staying focused.

Baseball has gotten a lot more complicated on the surface than it was when I was a kid. Coaches have relief pitchers who work short relief, and some who work long relief. There is a designated hitter, a pinch hitter who only faces righties, and another for lefties. Then there's the bunt and run specialist and power hitter. But the fundamentals of the game are still the same.

New cars are similar. They still obey the same laws of physics that the old ones did, but now there are so many players on the equipment roster that it gets tough to keep track of them all. Especially when something goes wrong.

Recently, a couple of cars made things tough on us when they seemed to be cured of their sloppy play, only to suffer mysterious relapses. But the basics, the fundamentals were the only place to go when things went wrong. Here are a few suggestions for tightening up your game when an intermittent or just plain mysterious electrical or driveability problem sends you to the showers early.

• **Make sure you're looking for the right problem.** This means you'll probably need to break down and actually talk to the customer. Ask what the problem is, when it's most likely to occur, and how often it happens. Document his complaint in reasonable detail on the repair order. If someone else has already tried and failed to correct the problem, ask for the previous repair order.

• **Test drive the car whenever it's possible to do so.** With any luck, you'll experience the problem firsthand. Use this experience to supplement whatever the customer told you.

• **Have the right tools for the job.** A Ouija board® and a rabbit's foot don't count. If it's a computer or wiring problem, a wiring diagram is a must (it was for us on these jobs). Even if you don't have a roomful of special factory authorized equipment, you can still diagnose many problems with simple tools: a vacuum gauge, a compression gauge, a fuel pressure gauge, a DVOM, an oscilloscope, and maybe even a breakout box.

• **Eliminate the obvious.** A factory tech trainer conducting a troubleshooting competition for his top technicians once told me that the only car his All Stars failed to fix was the one with the empty gas tank.

• **Charge for the diagnosis.** We all work better when we aren't working for free. I know my own attention span shortens considerably when the meter isn't running. Bad work is no work at all.

• **If problems arise unexpectedly, do three things:**  
1) Stay cool. Walk away from the problem for a while if necessary. Excuse the cliché, but sometimes standing back a bit helps you focus more on the forest than on a single knotty tree. 2) Double check the basics first. Just because the car passed all the tests the first time doesn't mean it'll pass them all again. That's why they call them "intermittent" problems. 3) Don't be afraid to ask for help. A fresh perspective on a problem can put you back on track.

• **Keep a detailed list of all the tests you've performed.** Do this for two reasons: 1) If you are forced to retest a system for a recurrence of a problem, you have an accurate record of test values from the first set of tests for purposes of comparison. The great Holmes kept track of such things when he solved his mysteries. 2) You have something concrete to hand the customer when you pass along your charges for services rendered.

I'm sure each of you can add to this list, especially those of you who've been beaned from time to time. Feel free to do so.

In the meantime, just remember to keep your eye on the ball, and your mind on the job.

And don't forget the basics.

Right coach?

—By Ralph Birnbaum