

The Round Robin Approach to Model Railroading

By Tony J. Bowen

In the fall 1998 I official started to build benchwork on my railroad. At the time I figured I would be the only one operating it, with the layout only being seen by family and friends. After about two years of building benchwork on my own I was getting at times a little frustrated and overwhelmed with some of the ideas I had planned. So I took a small break rethought some of my ideas of what I could accomplish on my railroad and thought how could I get some help from others in the area where I lived. At the time there were no other model railroaders that I knew of in Coggon.

My first thought was to run a small advertisement in our local small town newspaper. Sure enough I had some one call me the same day the ad ran in the newspaper. So I made arrangements to visit with the other modeler (George) in my area one evening after work. When I stopped by George's house he welcomed me in to see his railroad. I suggested that if he would like he could also stop by and visit my railroad, which he said he would.

Once I enter George's basement I realized that his view in model railroading and mine were very different. His layout consisted of a 4'x 4' HO scale box train set which he had picked up at Wal-Mart on an after Christmas sale. There it sat in the corner of his basement, the train traveling around and around on that tight 18" radius track going as fast as it could go. George then started to dig out some of the items he had picked up at an auction. He had all of the classics, the Styrofoam tunnels, the Bachmann and Tyco loading rams and many other accessories.

I wasn't sure what to say, so I did not say anything except, "I like what you have started." Which thinking back may have lead him on to this type of modeling, but then I thought wait... this hobby is his and he can do with it what he may, as long as he is enjoying it.

After about 15 minutes George said could we head over to my house to see my railroad. All of a sudden I felt a real fear coming on. What would George think of my railroad? Would he be offended, amazed, inspired, I wasn't sure. So George and I headed on over to my house. George took one step inside my train room and he was amazed. However, I got the feeling that George realized right then and there, that his version and my version of model railroading were quite different.

After not having much luck by trying to advertise for model railroaders in the area I sent out a letter to fellow model railroaders who I had known from an HO Club that existed at one time in Cedar Rapids. I was hoping it would result in getting together with other modelers.



Everything set up in the family room for an evening of building N scale DPM kits during a Round Robin work session at Tony Bowen's house. Notice each work area had its own cutting board with other tools and glues in the center of the table.

In January 2003 I sent out my first Round Robin Newsletter entitled Corn Country Rails: Round Robin News. The first newsletter was an invitation in hopes to drum up others of the idea for a Round Robin Railroad Group. I of course hosted the first meeting, in hopes that it would blossom to others being willing to host. Sure enough the first Thursday of the month came, which was going to be the Round Robin Night, and in typical Iowa fashion, we had a snowstorm and no one showed up. So everything was postponed to the next month. The first Thursday rolled around in February and three people showed up. Now at the time I thought this was a waste, I sent out 15 newsletters and only 3 people showed up. However, I learned quickly that this was okay not everyone is going to be able to make it to every Round Robin get together. Also the more people I had over at one time the more jobs I had to plan which was something I had not planned very well at first.



Michael Stocks of Manchester oversees the activities in the West Liberty Yard during an operating session on Tony Bowen's layout. Note the extra board in the background for crew calls during operating nights. This helps to keep the train room from getting overly crowded at one time. The off duty crews hang out in the family room (crew lounge).

Over the next three to four months we really started to gel well as a group. It was not long before other modelers, who were friends of a modeler who had attended, started to show up on the first Thursday nights of each month. The other item that was helpful was the newsletter. The newsletter recapped what took place during the last Round Robin Session for those who were unable to attend, but also set the agenda for the next month's get together. I was in charge of putting together the newsletter and mailing it out. The other modeler's were more than helpful in either giving money towards the postage or just providing me with stamps for the newsletter (since then I have updated to a newsletter sent electronically via e-mail).



Dave Baack of Cedar Rapids performs a set out of cars on Round Robin host's Bob Williams Chicago Great Western N Scale layout in Dyersville, Iowa. This was our first operating session on Bob's railroad. Operating on a different model railroad is a real learning experience. All of us made student trips that night as we were learning the layout.

Everything seemed to be going well, however we were still not a real Round Robin Group yet. I was hosting all of the meetings, and that was all well and fine as the progress on my railroad was moving along, but the goal was to move to other modeler's homes from month to month. During the summer of 2003 we took a break from meeting and the plan was to pick up again in the fall. Over that summer I developed a calendar which would encourage others to sign up for a month to host. When that newsletter went out the following fall the Round Robin months filled up by others who either wanted host work sessions or have operating sessions. Now the plan of a Round Robin Group was complete with the group actually moving from home to home each month.



During an operating session at one of our Round Robin Night's, Gary Weiner was the acting Dispatcher. This was a great learning experience for those of us who had not operated with head set radios, timetables, waybills and a dispatcher before.

Now in our third year of being around it has helped all of us out as modelers. We have had some pretty deep discussions on operations, waybills and car forwarding, (which will follow up this article in a few months). We have also had the exposure of working in different scales and on different layouts, which has given us inspiration to look at our own railroads and try new or different techniques. We have also moved to summer operating nights just to keep us involved in the hobby. The past two years we have taken one of our summer operating nights and have turned it into a potluck picnic. Grilling hamburgers, eating outside, operating trains, and finishing the evening off by watching some railroad slides.



On this Round Robin Night Michael Stock showed Gary Weiner and Bob Williams some ways to utilize our computers when setting up for operating session.

There is always room for others to join our Round Robin Group since there is always a need for operators on running nights, and benchwork can get built so much faster with help during work session nights, and unlike a model railroad clubs there are no dues. Just make sure the host makes a plate of goodies and provides something to drink, and the model railroading fellowship will take over from there.

On average I have about 15 people who receive the Round Robin Newsletter that I send out electronically, however there seems to be about 8 to 10 of us that get together regularly depending on schedules. One thing that has helped is that we have moved away from the first Thursday of the month for our get togethers. Instead we have let the Round Robin host for the month pick a day and time that works for them. Which has resulted in a better turn out.

As members of the Eastern Iowa Division of the Mid-Continent Region, let me know if you would be interested in receiving the Corn Country Rails Round Robin Newsletter electronically as an extra model railroading activity that takes place within our area to promote that hobby that we all share enjoyment in.



Scenery work that was completed on Gary Weiner's HO scale layout in Dubuque during a work session.

Contact information for the Corn Country Rails Round Robin Newsletter:
E-mail Tony Bowen at tbowen@northlinn.k12.ia.us and in the e-mail message say you would like to receive the Corn Country Rails Newsletter, or visit the World's Greatest Hobby at www.greatesthobby.com/wgh/directory/clubs_info.asp?recid=1681&type=2&mode=view