

All I Needed to Know (about Model Railroading) I learned by Entering the Achievement Program

I thought I was a pretty good modeler until I entered a contest. It was then I found how far I still had to go. I haven't gotten there yet, either.

Enter to improve your modeling skills. Thinking I was a good modeler, I entered three models in my first contest. None won merit awards. But the judges and their comments showed me the way to improve my modeling.

Enter to challenge yourself. Take on something new or something that may seem beyond your reach. You might find that you can reach it after all.

Push yourself with a deadline. Sometimes I let a model just sit nearly finished and can't bear to finish it. A contest deadline is absolute. The model has to be finished on that date and at that time. Of course, don't pull all-nighters or burn vacation days to finish. I've done both. On second thought, maybe a vacation day spent enjoying our hobby is a good thing.

Enter to win a merit award. That is the main reason I enter.

Enter to have your model viewed by unbiased eyes. We all can be blind to obvious defects and areas on our models that cry out for improvement.

Don't enter to finish first in a category: A great model might get edged out by one that's just a little better in the judge's eyes. My worst contest model won its category. It was the only entry. My first Merit Award winner came in second (actually last). Guess which I'm more proud of?

Don't enter to get Best of Show. Someone might have finished that scratch-built brass locomotive or completed their steel mill. Then your great model might not win. Also, a so-so model might win because of a lack of entries. It can just be chance or the luck of the draw. Plans are good; your own plans are better. They will get you credit in scratchbuilding. Just make sure they make sense when compared to prototype practices. If they don't, explain why not.

Model it and then write it down. Judges need to be told, maybe twice, what you did. Keep a count of the pieces in the model and the hours it took to build. Judges love statistics. I am always surprised by the piece

count in a completed model, but I haven't totaled the hours yet. Why? If I'm enjoying myself, why track the time? But you might want to keep that record when you enter a model.

Remember judges are human. They can't get it perfect all the time, every time. Once something I had done (and written down) was missed by the judges and cited as an area needing improvement. What are you going to do? Try again, I suppose.

Read the judges' comments (maybe a day or two later). They should be telling you how to make this model better (or the next one). Better yet, talk with the judges after the contest. They'll explain the score and their comments. I find that I just can't rework a model once it has been in a contest, but others have and have been rewarded.

It is a very humbling experience to be a judge. Try it sometime. Just do it when you haven't entered a model in the contest. Judges-in-training are always welcome. The NMRA gives judging matrixes to help insure uniform judging. When I read them, my scores made more sense. It isn't so easy to look at others' work and assign a point value to what they have done. I've been glad to serve as a judge. You should try it, too.

Vary the type of work you do on the model. A couple of days of fine work might be spelled with some time writing the entry form or drawing plans.

Always check to see what items are exempt from the scratchbuilding requirements. They can be your friends. I'm very

glad that wheels, trucks, and couplers are exempt from the cars scratchbuilding requirements.

If you're starting with a kit, see what you can make on your own. I got my confidence to scratchbuild by building an underbody and adding trucks, wheels, and couplers. When a locomotive could pull it on the track, I knew I was on my way. Everything but the car body itself was discarded. That was the last kit car I entered in a contest. If you can't make the scratchbuilt part work, there is still the part from the kit. Styrene and strip wood make for cheap mistakes. If it isn't right, throw it away, right away. Then try again.

Think of the time it takes to make a plastic kit car contest ready. I spent many hours shaving off molded grab irons and ladders, sanding those areas flat, then more time re-scribing the boards. None of that work earned any extra points. A scratchbuilt body is actually much easier.

You say you don't want to enter a contest? No problem. Have your entry judged by the AP Chair or his/her representative. It's not as stressful. The judges are allowed to converse with you, asking questions about the model during the judging, asking for clarification, or more information. The write-up is not as critical and it is certainly a more comfortable process.

Don't like others judging your work? You can begin your participation in the Achievement Program by working in areas that do not require judging. The certificates

for Electrical, Chief Dispatcher, Volunteer, and Official do not require judging, just record keeping. Start in those areas and take on the contests and judging later. Achieving Master Model Railroader requires seven certificates; with those four you can be more than halfway without entering a single model in a contest or facing any judging.

Prototype Modeler fascinates me. I'm drawn to it like a moth to the flame. The catch is that you need to model a prototype scene with motive power, rolling stock, caboose or passenger car, and railroad structure. I can't find a photo for my era with all the required elements. I guess I'll just have to keep looking.

The NMRA designed the Achievement Program to have a modeler display proficiency in varied areas of model railroading. You don't have to become an expert in everything, Take part, learn, and gain

knowledge in a range of areas. Believe me, you will become a better modeler.

Above all, don't take it too seriously: We are supposed to be having fun and be-

coming better modelers. I always try to keep that thought foremost. Remember, it's a hobby!

ENJOY, LEARN, ENJOY. 📱