

Rules for Great Spotters & Great Drivers

By Dan Strà, Past President, JonFund 4X4 Club

There are a lot of fine points to the art of spotting. Great spotting -- truly refined expertise in this area -- is something that takes a lot of time and experience to learn. This experience comes only from watching others and trying to apply what you have learned.

I would like to suggest a few things that all spotters should know that pave the way for a safer and more enjoyable trail experience for you and the driver.

Drivers, too, should be as knowledgeable about the basic rules of spotting as the spotters are. Drivers have a different set of spotting rules to follow but the rules for drivers are just as important as the rules for spotters. When both sides follow the rules, the trail becomes a much smoother place.

(Note to the would-be spotter: Reading this article does not make you a spotter. It is designed to help you understand the dynamics of spotting more fully. You will have a better experience when you are on the trails if you acknowledge the hierarchy and organization of a run and blend in with their procedures.)

Suggested Rules for Spotters

RULE NUMBER ONE

The first rule of ALL GREAT SPOTTERS is this...

** A good spotter will always look for another person who is already spotting the driver and will then do nothing but wait to be asked for help.*

Virtually EVERYONE on a club run can, and should when needed, be a spotter; but only if they are all reminded of that rule. Following the Spotting Rule #1 will keep things a lot more organized than those unruly times when EVERYONE is yelling directions and confusing the poor driver.

RULE NUMBER TWO

This could be rule #1, it is a toss-up. It is the only rule I see broken more than rule #1. It seems like we frequently forget or don't bother to ask the driver if he/she would LIKE to have a spot. There are many drivers who will know their rig well enough to be able to just know where the difficulties are. Then there are folks who just don't want to have a spotter. Rule #2 is...

- *A good spotter will always ask the driver if he/she would like to have a spot before he starts issuing signals.*

This is a golden rule. Never break it.

RULE NUMBER THREE

A good spotter knows that there will always be others yelling directions from the trail side and he knows that there will always be a newer driver who finds that confusing. This being the case, rule # 3 of great spotting is...

** Create a bond with the driver. Make sure the driver is locked on to you and only you.*

This is done by taking the time to walk up to the driver and have a short driver chat.... "Hey, I am going to spot you through this. I want you to focus on me and tune everyone else out, OK?"

It is funny but scuba dive instructors do something very similar to this when bringing a student down under water for the first time. They use two fingers in the shape of a V and move them from their eyes toward yours while locking in your gaze to theirs. They have learned that doing so actually helps a new diver get through the initial anxiety of being under water and helps them to not reflexively hyperventilate.

Creating a bond with the driver goes a long way to help him get through those times when there are a lot of people trying to spot. It helps him block out distractions and it places you as the point person.

RULE NUMBER FOUR

When we are four-wheeling there is a lot going on. There is engine noise, other vehicles moving around, and people talking. Additionally, the distance between the spotter and the driver in the middle of an obstacle make verbal signals not always the most effective way to communicate.

With that in mind, rule #4 of great spotting is...

** A great spotter will make sure that the driver understands and agrees to the hand signals.*

Here are a few examples of frequently used hand signals...

- STOP: Use a closed fist for a stop.
- TURN RIGHT OR LEFT: Point with the index finger (or thumb) to the left or the right when you want the driver to turn the wheel and, if he is not turning far enough we point and push the finger in that direction at the same time.
- ADVANCE: Extend an open hand so that the palm is facing AWAY from the driver, we then fold the thumb in so that it is not confused as a directional signal, and, keeping the fingers together, we wave the fingers inward a repeating manner.
- REVERSE: Using one or both open palms, FACING the driver, we make a

pushing motion in a repeating manner. When doing reverse we may go to the back of the vehicle to help the driver back up safely.

- COMBINATIONS: Use one hand for a directional signal and the other for motion. To get the driver to turn the wheels without moving simply hold up one closed fist and use the other hand to point. To signal movement keep the directional finger pointing but open the closed fist to signal the direction you want.

Suggested Spotter Rules for Drivers

Drivers can have a HUGE part in how organized or disorganized spotting is done around his vehicle. Oddly enough, drivers can do a lot to encourage great spotting. In fact, when a driver knows great spotting he can do certain things that can force a spotter to follow the rules without ever saying a word.

DRIVER RULE NUMBER ONE

Whether or not he will be spotted is up to the driver and the driver should be the one who decides if he wants a spot or not. The means that drivers rule #1 is...

** Ask for a spot or specify that you do not want a spot.*

If you do NOT want a spot it is sometimes helpful to say it loud enough to be heard over all of the noise of the run (or, really, to make sure everyone hears you).

Rule #1 is subject to your acknowledging the hierarchy of the group. This means that there may be times when you don't want a spot but someone in leadership in the group feels the need to keep things moving for the sake of time or other reasons. When that happens it is usually best to just go with the flow.

DRIVER RULE NUMBER TWO

The spotter may not instinctively know that if he stops moving you should stop moving. In fact, he may even ask you why you stopped moving. Here rule #2 comes in...

** If spotter is not moving or directing you in some way then don't move. It should always be like this...if the spotter directs you, you move, if the spotter stops directing, you stop moving.*

DRIVER RULE NUMBER THREE

In the event that your spotter does not practice Spotter Rule #3 - the rule about creating a bond -- then the driver can make it happen all by himself. Driver rule #3 is...

** Lock on to your spotter and tune everyone else out.*

This accomplishes another effect. With the driver and the spotter visually locked together, observers (would be spotters) quickly learn that you are not listening to them; you are listening to the spotter. Once they catch on to this they will start yelling at the spotter and not at you.

In Summary

A lot of these spotting issues would not need to be brought up if more folks just focused on watching the spotter and learning from his or her techniques. Some times it would also help if we had less heckling and helpful onlookers. But part of our sport is the group enjoyment of the adventures of others. So we have to overcome that in order to prevent vehicle damage and unnecessary trail delays. Observing these rules is the first step.

Fortunately, it is a lot easier to teach drivers how to pay attention to spotters and to teach spotters how to get drivers to focus on them than it is to teach every person on every trail-run to not try to help with spotting. It is just human nature to help out. Non-spotters, are you getting a message here?

This being the case, our expectations of spotters and drivers needs to be set correctly. When both the driver AND the spotter are on the same page all the yelling in the world won't make a darn bit of difference.

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