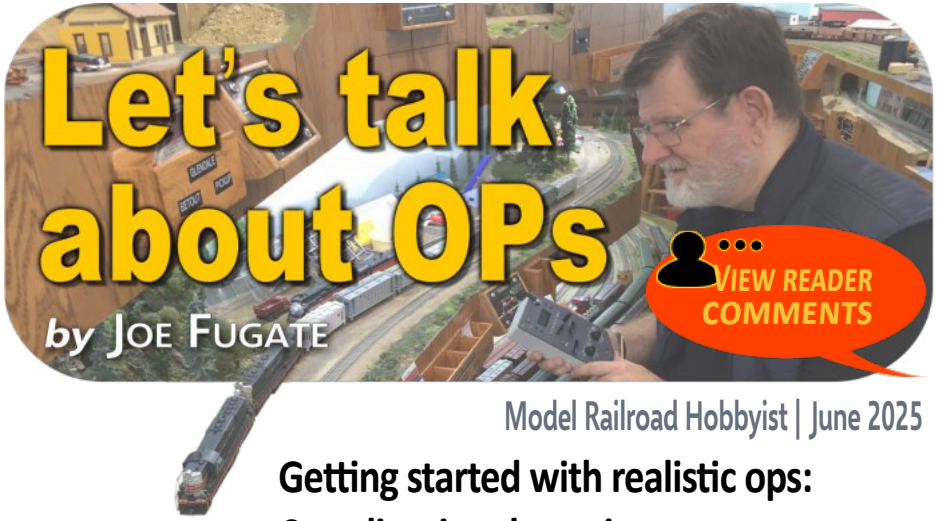



Model Railroad Hobbyist | June 2025

## Getting started with realistic ops: Coordinating the trains

**Once you have the trains determined and you invite the guys over for a serious op session, how do you coordinate the movement of the trains?** Or does everyone just start out all at once and you hope nobody collides?

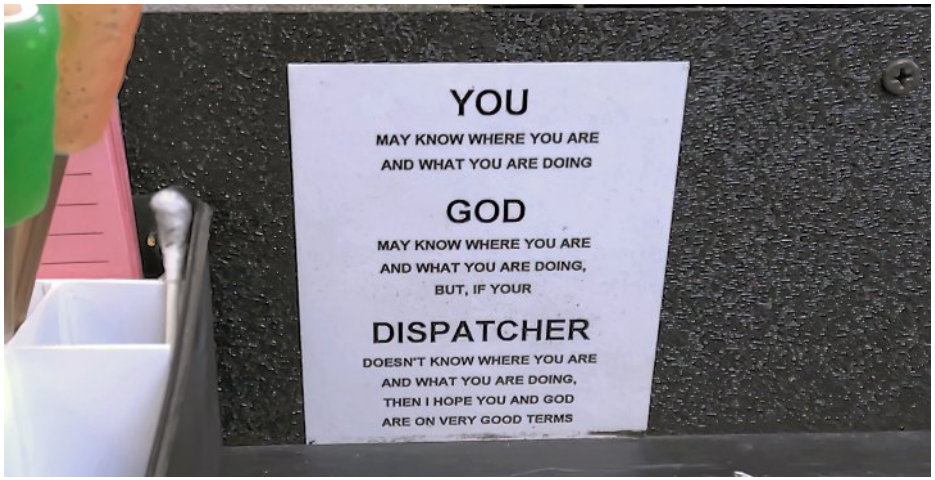
Obviously, the real railroads can't do that or they will have quite a mess on their hands with destroyed equipment, damaged freight, and worst of all, several possible crew and passenger fatalities.

While you can get away with what is often called "mother may I" verbal ad hoc model train coordination during a layout op session, it feels more like you're directing a kid's ball game than running a railroad.

The real railroads use a dispatcher to play "traffic cop" for the movement of the trains. The dispatcher not only tells the trains when they can leave, they also manage how the trains move over the road with meets. The real railroads call these instructions train orders and they have special forms for issuing them.

Prior to the common availability of portable radios, the railroads used phone lines to communicate their train orders. The general method is the dispatcher gives a train directional authority to a section of track – on other words, you can move from A to B in one direction only. The rear of your train must not back up without permission. The locos on the front may go forwards or backwards within their authorized section of track as long as the rear of the train *never backs up.*






1. John Depauw (his EJ&E is the cover story layout this month) had these signs placed around the railroad on the fascia. While the reminder is expressed in a humorous fashion, the message is quite serious if you want an op session to go smoothly.

If you're a local that will need to switch industry spurs, obviously you will need the ability to go both backwards and forwards. That's a special kind of train order called a "work between" to give everyone a heads up the rear of your train may move in reverse, so beware!

It's also important you keep the dispatcher informed of your location as you move through your assigned trackage. On a model railroad, it's common to have a phone on the fascia or to be using radios and for you to report your progress to the dispatcher as you pass a station.

If you're switching a town, you also need to keep the dispatcher apprised of your progress so they will know if you can get in the clear to let a mainline train pass.

I like John Depauw's clever sign he has on his layout [1]. It nicely summarizes a train operator's need to keep the dispatcher informed of your whereabouts! ☑

## KEEPING IT MOVING ON THE NEW JERSEY DIVISION

Following established prototype rules and employing a dispatcher to call the shots keeps everything moving on a busy model railroad like the New Jersey Division. Railroad operations are all about who has authority to occupy a track at a given time.

Unlike timetable and train order operations, modern railroading is more reliant on dispatchers to make case-by-case decisions affecting authority and operations. The New Jersey Division takes this approach.

The dispatcher makes decisions on movements based on several factors including the type of train, congestion on the lines or in yards, and how long a train's work will take. A mainline intermodal would have priority over a local freight, for example, but that doesn't mean the local will must sit idle until the intermodal is down the line.

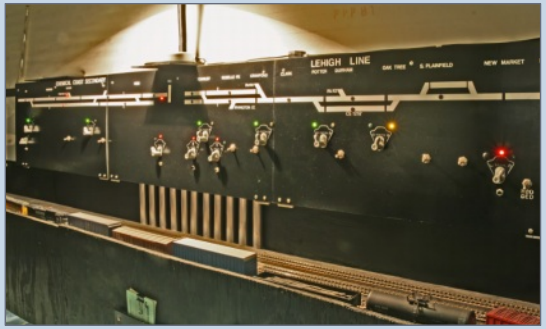
Modern dispatching systems divide the railroad into blocks. The dispatcher can control the signals and main track switches using computers or CTC panels to allow trains to enter and exit each block. A signal indication will tell the train crew what to do.

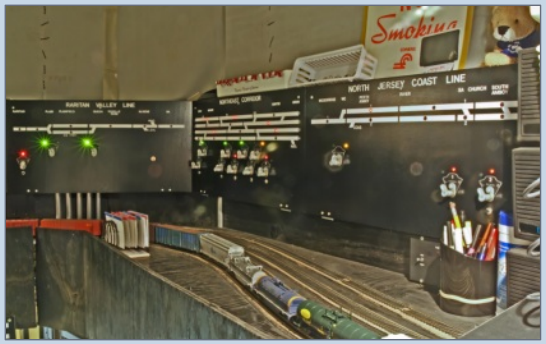
My New Jersey Division employs "CTC Light." Since mainline runs are short, the Dispatcher controls the main track switches – crossovers and switches from single to double track – and signals for each line. Signal control using turnout position, combined with track occupancy detection provides trains with lineside signal indications. ■

*Sidebar continues on the next page ...*

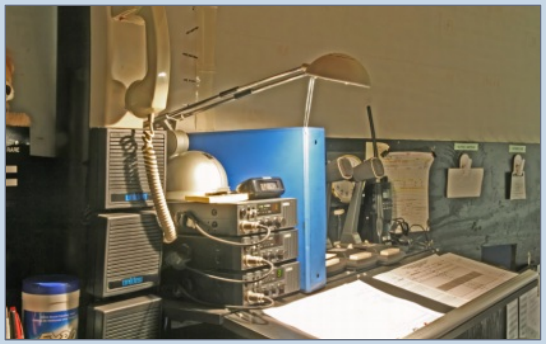







37, 38. Five CTC Panels wrap around the dispatcher's office, controlling movements on each rail line.



39. These base radios at the Dispatcher's desk provide contact with trains, yards, and support personnel, such as track foremen or the car department. This allows the dispatcher to control movements directly, allowing trains to pass each other without waiting for priority trains to arrive at a specific destination.