



Filling Out the Forms to Finish First

*By Bob Hamm, MMR, Rev. 10-8-15
NMRA National Contest Chairman*



The Model Contest is one of the core activities at NMRA conventions and can be one of the most enjoyable as well for participants, spectators and staff. After weeks and often months in the building the completed models, many masterpieces, are ready to share with fellow modelers. The models are judged using a uniform point score method to compete with similar entries for place awards as well as point levels for merit awards for the Achievement Program. Recognition is given to all award winners at an awards ceremony.

We want the whole activity to be enjoyable for everyone involved and work hard to streamline and minimize the administrative aspect. The contest rules are simple and straightforward although there may be minor variations from the national and to the various regions. They are typically available at appropriate websites. Likewise, the entry forms are similarly available. They are designed to gather the minimum information we need about you, the builder and the model itself. At the national there two forms to fill out, #901, the Entry Form and #902, the Judging Form.

Some modelers view making out the forms as drudgery and spend as little time as possible with them. After having participated in various regional and national contests many times over the years as well as having chaired contests both regionally and nationally I view the forms a little differently. While it's not my favorite activity there are ways to take the work out of it. First off it's always better to do them home before you come to the convention. There is less pressure and you can easily access your prototype references, which you might forget if you wait until the convention itself. Secondly, I view the process as an opportunity to tell the judges and fellow modelers about this really great model and all the neat things I've put into it.

The Entry Form #901, shown in Figure 1, is pretty straightforward and is used for all contest events at the national including photo, arts & crafts, the People's Choice, the Model Showcase as well as the judged model contest. It starts with your personal information, the entry name and then model category and classification.

Category simply defines the type of model such as freight cars, passenger cars, structures, etc., so similar types compete against each other. The nine listed represents a good balance between having too many categories which results in little or no competition and too few categories which pairs too many dissimilar models against each other which also results in poor competition.

Motive Power, Other includes diesels, electrics, gas-electric etc. everything except steam and traction. Splitting each of these into separate categories just isn't justified by the numbers of entries. Freight and passenger cars are straightforward as are non-revenue cars and cabooses. Express reefers are included in the passenger category as head end cars.

Dioramas and structures are similar. Both contain buildings and may be surrounded with scenery. In the diorama category we judge the complete scene, while for structures we regard only the building itself whether it has scenic elements or not. Sometimes it's not clear which is the best category to enter. If your model is set in a nice scene, you can go either way and may want to decide based on the competition. Individual structures in a scene can be judged as separate structure entries. For AP consideration structure merit awards are given for model achieving 87.5 points while no merit awards are given for dioramas regardless of point score.

Classification at the national contest separates the models entered in the Scratch Built competition and those in the Kit Built contest. You can enter either class; however if you enter the kit class, you are declaring that more than 50% of the models was built from a kit or commercial parts and are only eligible for 8 of the 15 scratch built pts.. There is a full array of place awards for both kit and scratch built classes.

The Entry Form then continues with several disclosures regarding eligibility and finishes with your signature and an estimated entry value. The staff will give you a claim check when you turn in the forms which you will need to present when picking up your model at the end of the contest. Scoring and awards information is filled in by the contest staff when the forms are returned to you after the judging.

The Judging Form, #902, shown in Figure 2, is a really important part of making sure your model does well. It's less a question of right or wrong in making out it out then using a good strategy to get the best score. I'll try to give you some tips on what works and what doesn't.

You do not have to use the judging form, but if you don't, be sure to include the same information and try to keep it in the same order. If you don't, the judges may or may not be able to find what they need to award you the best possible score. Each factor is judged by a separate team who may only read the section pertaining to their factor.

Generally more information is better than less. However, once the description (of each factor) spills over onto multiple pages its effectiveness diminishes because the judges typically have 5 to 6 min. for each factor for each model, and thus only have time to read a page at the most. Be sure to put the most important information at the start of each section rather than the end.

Best strategy – Use the form. In fact you can type it on the PDF form and then print it out. Fill out completely and concisely with important info up front.

The Judging Form addresses five factors each one comprising a different aspect. They are construction, conformity, detail, appearance, and scratch-built. Each one has a different set of judging criteria. All are judged based on the skill and effort expended and employ a two-dimensional point matrix as a guide to separate the skill part from the effort part. One axis considers the effort expended which manifests in the size, scope and/or complexity of the model while the other axis assesses the skill demonstrated, which is a measure of quality or quantity depending on the factor. In other words what did the modeler set out to do and how complex is the model versus how well he accomplished his goal. Several examples will be given as I describe the factors. The total number of points that a model can achieve is 125.

Construction considers the quality and craftsmanship in how the model is put together and is worth 40 points. We first try to determine the construction basis of the model. Is it partially scratch built using many commercial castings? Completely scratch built with just a few castings? Was it built from a kit? Was it made from several different kits, a kit bash? Is it a modified ready-to-run model? You get the idea. Given the many different ways each one can be constructed (kit, scratch, RTR etc.) and the many different types of models (boxcar, locomotive, station, water tank scene etc.) it is important for the judges to assess these two aspects to determine the complexity and hence the effort expended. The form then continues by asking for the specific construction techniques employed. Some have check off boxes, but also describe the materials and techniques you used to construct the model particularly pointing out any unusual techniques such as molding or machining parts, or assembly jigs.

With construction the matrix judges the complexity and effort against the quality of the work. For example, consider a beautifully done outhouse (four walls, shed roof and a door) versus a multi-building mill complex (many roof lines, windows, doors, etc.) constructed nicely but not quite as well as the outhouse. The outhouse is clearly a simple structure and because of that would be limited to something like 20 points max. Because it was extremely well built would mean that it would probably get 18 or 19 points out of the 20 but no more. On the other hand the mill structure is so much more complex and thus much more to construct that it would be given a complexity level of probably 36 to 38 or higher, so even though the quality of craftsmanship is not quite as good the other model, it would probably achieve high 20's or low 30's and score higher. This gives you a little strategy in deciding which model to enter.

With regard to building from a kit or using commercial parts you need to remember that the judges do not give credit for what a manufacturer does, only the effort you expend, so you may want to augment the model by scratch building extra features. This

is particularly important for models entered in the Kit Built Class, but remember that models entered in the Kit Built Class cannot be modified by more than about 50%.

Best strategy – Choose an entry with at least medium complexity and do a good job of describing its construction. And if using commercial parts (kit or otherwise), compensate by putting extra effort into the quality and increase the complexity of what you build. Add a porch, an interior, add complete brake rigging.

Conformity refers to the prototype or prototype intent of the model and is worth up to 25 points. You are judged on the complexity and scope of the prototype and how well you have captured that in your model including the effort you have expended in gathering the prototype information, so you need to do a good job researching and presentation. If it is a freelance model, still describe the prototype design to establish the type of construction and features. In either case attach prototype plans, photos and/or other documentation of similar structures to substantiate your model. Using only kit-provided documentation will lower score. Lacking such documentation entirely will limit your factor score to a maximum of 15 out of 25. Also if your model deviates from the documentation, be sure to point that out.

Best strategy - Choose a model which has more rather than fewer prototype features, use one or two photos which really look like the model and then make sure you have added everything shown in the photos.

Detail is next allowing a total of 20 points. Here the key word is quantity. The more detail the better. The more complex and detailed the prototype and the more you add to the model the better. To an extent this goes hand-in-hand with conformity. Name every single detail you add on and/or draw arrows on the prototype photos pointing out those details. Also, be sure to list all commercial parts used.

Best strategy – detail, detail, and detail, everything you can see then describe and show on photo.

Appearance is very straightforward and worth 25 points. The complexity of the intended finish is judged vs. quality of the actual finish. Check the boxes for materials and techniques used in finishing the model and then describe your methods. It is important to let us know the state of the prototype you are trying to achieve, new old, clean or weathered if it is not described in the prototype documentation or description.

Best strategy – Make sure every visible feature on the model is finished. Adding a little weathering makes the finish a little more appealing and complex.

Scratch-Built factor seeks to establish how much of the model you actually built yourself from basic materials as opposed to using commercially made parts. The judging matrix is based on the complexity of the prototype in terms of construction and details versus how many of those you scratch-built. Describe completely all of the features you scratch built including plans if you drew them. The judges will correlate this with your listing of commercial parts under details.

Whether your model is scratch-built or kit built is key to this factor. Kits built straight from the box or with primarily commercial parts will limit your score. For example, a structure kit, which includes door, window and detail castings for everything, and will likely limit you to the lower half of the overall range. However building the same structure from scratch may result in much higher score.

Now if you are entered in the Kit Built classification, you are automatically restricted to 8 points in this category. However remember you are competing against other kit built models for place awards.

Best strategy – In the Scratch Build Class make sure you do as much scratch building as possible. In the Kit Built Class modify or augment your kit-built model with a lot of extra scratch-built parts, but remember you can only get a maximum of 8 points. In both cases be sure to describe all of the items you have scratch built.

In summary filling out the forms particularly the Judging Form may take a little effort but typically no more than an hour or so and will be a small percentage of the time you spent building your masterpiece. Just like a resume a concise, well written model description will put your best foot forward and help the judges pull the maximum number of points out of your model and give you the best chance of taking home a first place. Believe me all of us on the contest staff have been there. We know how hard you worked, and many times how much emotion has been put into the effort, and we promise to be fair and strive to do the best we can for you and your model.

Best strategy – Don't take it too seriously; work hard, but have fun. It's only a hobby!