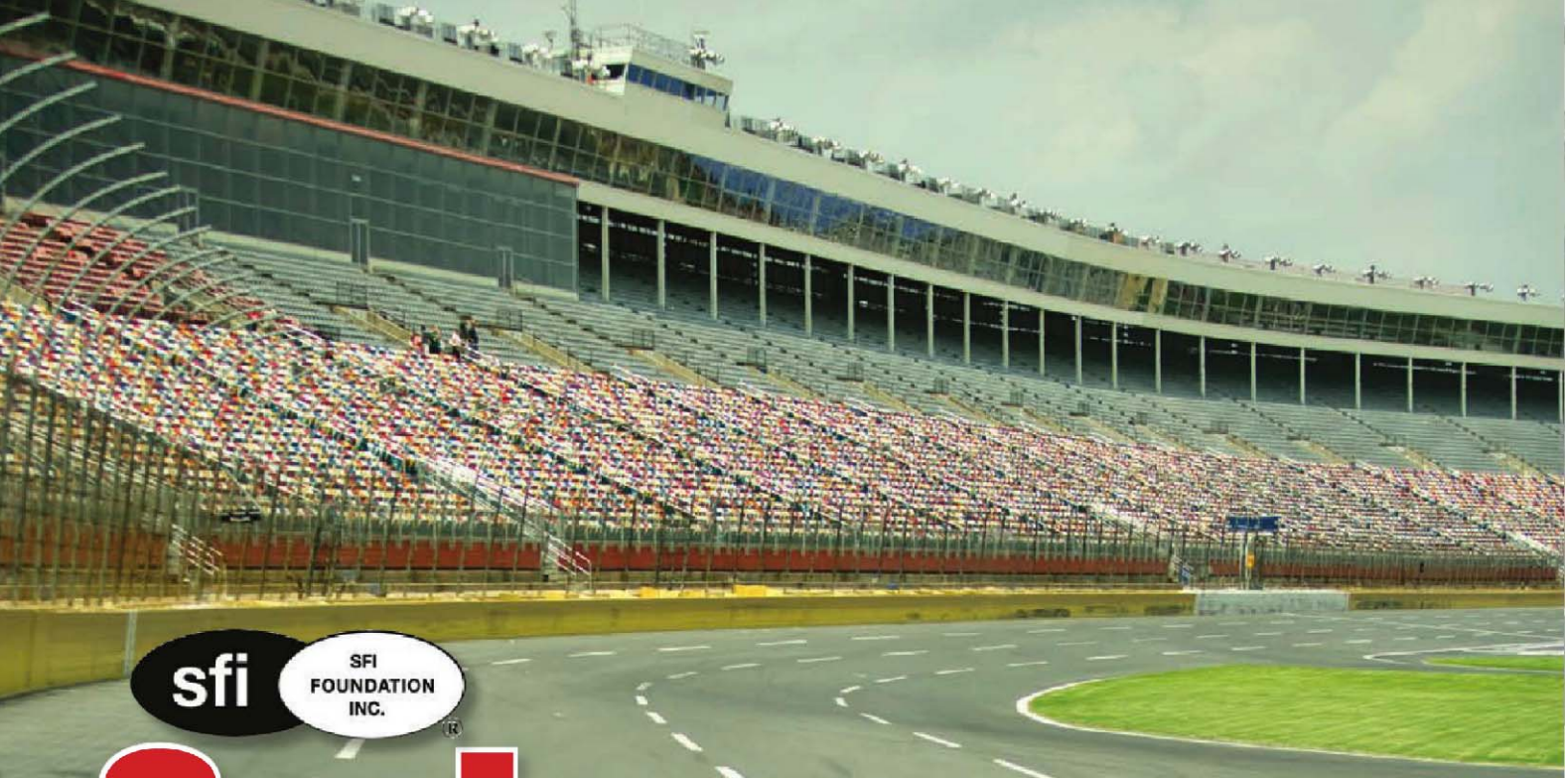


SFI FOUNDATION INC.

Serious Business

BY JEF WHITE

The SFI Foundation works hard to ensure safety equipment works as advertised.

Working closely with manufacturers, consumers, motorsports sanctioning bodies, racers and government agencies, the SFI Foundation offers third-party testing services to ensure racing-related products meet certain quality benchmarks.

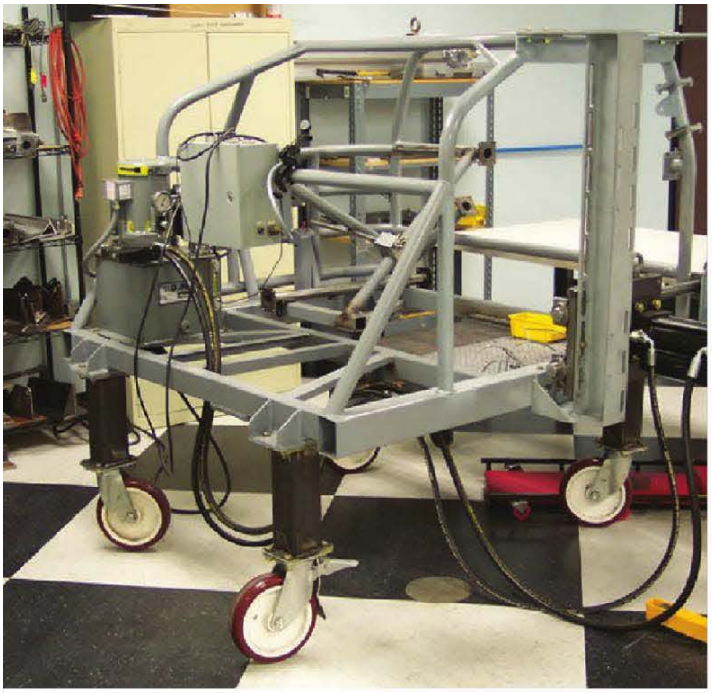
THE PERFORMANCE AFTERMARKET is all about having a good time. But when it comes to the safety of competitors on the racetrack, things get serious.

Enter the SFI Foundation, an organization that "develops and administers various standards, testing criteria and methods of manufacturer certification for the industry, as well as a number of other safety-related programs and services."

Working closely with manufacturers, consumers, motorsports sanctioning bodies, racers and government agencies, SFI offers third-party testing services to ensure racing-related products meet certain quality benchmarks.

Speed shops may often deal with products marked as "SFI-certified." It doesn't mean the organization specifically endorses the product—only that it has achieved certain specification levels outlined by the manufacturer.

"The most prevalent misunderstanding is that products with SFI certification are *SFI-approved*. Unfortunately, that inaccurate term is used frequently to describe certified equipment," says Jennifer Faye, SFI vice president. "If you look closely at any SFI conformance label or sticker, you'll find the words 'This Manufacturer Certifies that this Product Meets SFI Spec X.X.' It's actually the manufacturer of the product making the assurance that the item meets the requirements of the specification, not SFI. SFI merely oversees the administration of the program as a service to the motorsports community."



SFI currently has formal working relationships with more than 200 motorsports sanctioning bodies, clubs and facilities worldwide—a number that continues to grow as new forms of competition emerge. (Right) Carl Olson, SFI Motorsports Manager

It's an important mission that isn't taken lightly.

"Selling quality products meeting the appropriate standards at competitive prices will provide consumers and others with a critically important level of confidence that the safety-related products they purchase are proven to be capable of performing the functions for which they're designed and manufactured," notes Mike Hurst, SFI technical manager.

A Proud Heritage

SFI traces its roots all the way back to 1963 and the formation of the Speed Equipment Manufacturers Association, which is now known as the Specialty Equipment Market Association or SEMA.

At the time, one of the group's main goals was to establish product specifications that racing equipment manufacturers could follow, according to Carl Olson, SFI motorsports manager.

"Many unknowns faced the innovative entrepreneurs in areas of design criteria, testing and promulgation of specifications. But their dedication to the industry and racing won out and it wasn't long before the specifications were accepted and formed a part of sanctioning body rulebooks," he explains. "Eventually, if certain products on a vehicle didn't meet 'SEMA specs,' the owner could be denied participation in a motorsports event. A specs program for the performance products industry was born, and has continued for many years as a result of the determination of the founders of SEMA."

Approximately a decade later, the specifications effort became the responsibility of the SEMA Service Bureau, a group that was later replaced by the SEMA Foundation Inc. or SFI. The organization now operates independently of SEMA, but works closely with the association and its members.

Over the years, SFI has developed programs for nearly 80 different products used by manufacturers, motorsports groups and consumers worldwide. A recent success story involves the SFI 39.1 Stock Car Type Racing Seats (Custom) program.

"With the 2007 inception of SFI 39.1, these manufacturers—already capable of producing high-quality products—had a formal structural strength goal where none had existed before,"

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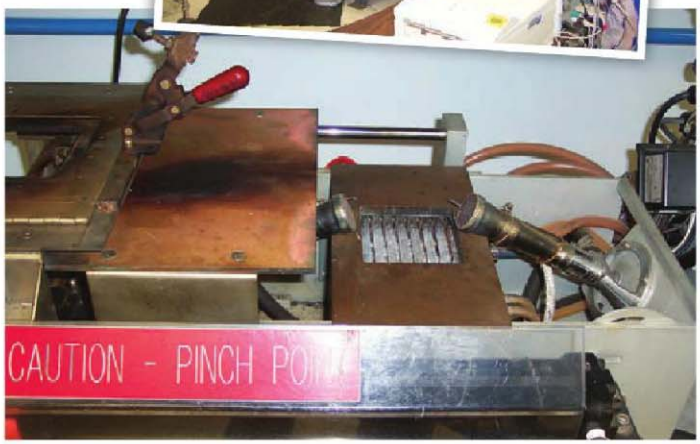
Mike Hurst, SFI Technical Manager



Shops that understand SFI certifications can offer a real service to racers, creating loyal, repeat customers.

Hurst explains. "In the last few years, the SFI 39.1 manufacturers, particularly those building aluminum seats, have incorporated clever and elegant design features to meet the performance requirements while reducing seat weight and cost. Some in the industry thought the (new) levels were impossible for an aluminum seat, but the knowledge gained from their development has now also influenced the design of SFI 39.2 Stock Car Type Racing Seats (Standard), making better seats available to even more racers."

This is a Test

Such breakthroughs are regularly made at the SFI facility in Poway, Calif. Participating manufacturers pay for development and administration of the programs through licensing fees and/or unit charges, and interested associations have also provided grants and donations.

Each SFI specification or standard has its own technical committee that oversees its development and ongoing review. The committees are comprised of product manufacturers, sanctioning body technical officials, and independent experts and engineers.

"They assess each standard against current conditions, usually every two years or more frequently if necessary," Faye says. "This practice ensures (products) remain relevant to their intended purpose. SFI views its specifications as living documents that continuously adapt as needed to the ever-changing motorsports environment."

If a manufacturer updates or changes a product, it is immediately retested.

"The purpose of revalidation testing is to demonstrate that the product continues to meet the minimum standard on an ongoing basis," Faye explains. "This practice strengthens the industry, because it assures the consumer that the certified products they're buying and using on the track should perform to the levels they expect."

Certified products are identified by the well-recognized SFI sticker, tag or patch affixed to the item, certifying that it meets the minimum standard.

SFI currently has formal working relationships with more than 200 motorsports sanctioning bodies, clubs and facilities worldwide—a number that continues to grow as new forms of competition emerge.

"New sanctioning bodies and racing leagues present a number of challenges to SFI. Foremost among them is helping them understand how SFI's safety-related programs and services can be of great benefit to them and their participants," Olson says. "Once a line of communication and a formal working relationship have been developed, progress toward a much safer competition environment is achieved very quickly and efficiently."

Each new participant brings along its own unique set of requirements, often resulting in the need for new or updated standards. SFI can respond quickly, Olson notes, thanks to modern advancements in communication and testing techniques.

"The ease with which information can be shared electronically definitely helps SFI disseminate important information to the industry, whether it is the listing of new participating manufacturers on our website (**www.SFIfoundation.com**), or notifying sanctioning body officials and manufacturers of specification revisions," he says. "On the technical side, the development of SFI specs benefits greatly from data gathered both in the laboratory and on the track."

"SFI views its specifications as living documents that continuously adapt as needed to the ever-changing motorsports environment."

—Jennifer Faye, SFI Vice President

What's In It for You?

Understanding SFI certification and knowing which products are approved for which competitions can offer speed shops a sales advantage.

"The ongoing evolution of the retail marketplace from brick-and-mortar speed shops to mail order to online purchases has reduced or in some cases eliminated the access of consumers to the knowledge of highly experienced and well-trained sales personnel," Olson says. "In the past, these professionals have guided their customers to the wisest possible choices in the purchase of high-performance and, specifically, safety-related equipment."

These days, he says, it's becoming more difficult for racers to make well-informed choices.

"Wholesale and retail outlets that do the best job of consumer education—be it in a store, in a printed catalog or online—will be well-positioned to take advantage of the inevitable demand for these kinds of products and services."

Offering certified products and understanding the SFI process sets up shops as experts that customers can rely on.

"In any business, if you know your market well, you have an advantage over your competitors. For speed shops and other retail outlets, the market is the race venue, and knowing the rules under which their customers compete is critical," Olson says. "If race shops are knowledgeable in the SFI certifications needed for the various types of racing that they service, they can help their customers navigate through them. If the shop successfully supplies them with the appropriate certified equipment and helps guide them in maintaining items that have a recertification life, then they will no doubt gain and retain many loyal customers."

And so, SFI will carry on with its mission to ensure the quality and safety of aftermarket components.

"Much time and effort has been invested in creating laboratory test standards that, to the extent possible, mimic the in-field performance of these products in reducing or eliminating accidents, injuries, fatalities, insurance claims and litigation," Olson says. "The critical importance of compliance with accepted industry-wide standards for safety-related products to all parties concerned—manufacturers, motorsports sanctioning bodies, wholesalers, retailers and most importantly, consumers—cannot be overstated."

In other words, it's serious business.