The Mainline Ether Mask

Robert "R.B." Frank
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Since I could walk and talk, my ambition was to be a mainline railway man. This ambition was realized in October of 1975 when I was called from the switchman's cut-off board to work as a head end brakeman from Richmond, Ca to Fresno, a distance of 1,034,880 feet (196 miles) on the old Santa Fe. 1 was FULLY rested and it was an all daylight trip. Believe it or not, I was so excited on this initiating trip; I fell unconscious for about the middle half of it, a distance of about 500,000 feet. I was as angry as I was guilt ridden at the half witnessing of my very first trip. Following this was my first layover, and as payback compensation for my sleep guilt, I spent this time memorizing all the timetable station names together with their milepost locations, which are still in memory.

Following my first layover was my first Fresno to Richmond return trip home, an all nighter. On this trip we also had a fireman, who was nodding off, as was the engineer. It was as if they had ether masks on about to undergo oral surgery, while sitting in small dentist chairs, which rocked a little. Being witness to this caused my relaxed blood pressure, otherwise known as drowsiness, to soar through the cab roof. The rest of that trip home I spent in a state of hyper consciousness. Back in Richmond, I asked my senior aged engineer what they did in his "day" to help stay alert, which is the same as asking, what did he do to boost blood pressure? His answer: "Prior to the 12 Hour, 14 Hour and 16 Hour Law, fatigue problems were far worse, so a few of the men inserted tobacco strands in the corners of their eyes to make them sting." Wow, I thought, my blood pressure rose just thinking about it, which kept me alert for the drive home, another 45 minutes.

Today, 37 years later, improved mainline working conditions have the very ironic effect of making drowsiness worse! Why? Smoother, laser lined track, smoother welded rail, sound insulated diesels, longer runs, bigger "dentist" chairs and the near extinction of smoking, etc. all contribute to relaxation. The resulting dialysis of veins and arteries cause blood pressure to lessen, which in turn lessens oxygen supply to the brain, the net effect of which is drowsiness. It's little wonder train wrecks and signal violations have trended worse.

As important as non-drowsiness is, equally important is to catch yourself as you become drowsy, and to instantly respond with technique(s) to overcome it. My favorite is holding my breath for one minute, which boosts my blood pressure. I then reward myself with hyper ventilating deep breaths, which re-oxygenate the inside of my skull. If this isn't your cup of tea or coffee, caffeinated of course, there exist hundreds of other cardio vascular contracting, blood pressure boosting, brain re-oxygenating techniques to personally suit you. At the odd end of the technique scale is urinating from the locomotive catwalk, preferably at night. A 30 second urination event at 30 mph will perfectly pinstripe the ballast for 1,350 feet, a distance of 4 h football fields. A speed not exceeding 30 mph is most definitely recommended.

In conclusion, this article is not meant to address the needs of type 1 or type 2 diabetics, hypoglycemia (low blood sugar), hyperglycemia (high blood sugar), lung disease, heart disease or chronic sleep deprivation. Rather, it is aimed at such things as Hypnotic Trance Syndrome, too much or too little sleep from the day before, the after effects of a heavy meal, boredom, etc. Otherwise, it is claimed that drowsy driving is as much of a killer as drunk driving, although the latter receives more publicity. It is further claimed that low blood pressure is as much of a killer as high blood pressure, although the latter receives far more publicity, also. Overly relaxed blood pressure, therefore, could be R.R. safety's missing link.

As Always, Thanks again.