



RACE READY

GEICO Racing crew chief Robert "Bootie" Barker at the team's race shop in Mooresville, N.C.

*A look under the hood at GEICO
Racing's NASCAR pit crew*



PAUL FERRISS



JOHN DAVIS



Mike "Tiny" Houston and Barker talk strategy

CRIS BRISTOL-JOHNSON SPRINTS around the front of the #13 Chevrolet race car, drops to his knees and slides beside the driver's side front tire, slamming his gun onto the first of five lug nuts holding the tire onto the wheel. Bristol-Johnson is the front tire changer on the GEICO Racing pit crew, and he's ready to fire the gun into its high-pitched squeal and send the lug nuts flying.

Mike "Tiny" Houston sits on the pit wall, keeping a watchful eye on Bristol-Johnson. Houston, the crew's front tire carrier, has worked in motorsports for 18 years. Bristol-Johnson is a part-timer with the team, learning his trade from the ground up. "Make sure you keep your knees apart and stay centered when you drop," Houston says. Otherwise, Bristol-Johnson will hit the lugs at an awkward angle, which will force him to remove the gun and try again. A DIY mechanic or even a professional wrench wouldn't notice the few seconds that motion would take. But, in the highly competitive world of NASCAR racing,

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that single movement could mean the difference between an 11-second pit stop and a much-too-long 15-second pit stop—between victory or finishing at the back of the pack.

It's a high-intensity game. And that's just practice.

But it's practice that builds a team. It's practice that enhances precision, encourages communication, instills physical and mental agility and mixes it all with a healthy dose of locker-room camaraderie. Casey Mears drives the #13 car and justifiably gets the lion's share

of attention as the face of the team. But it's pit crew members like Houston, Bristol-Johnson, Josh Leslie, Ryan Dextraze, Justin Fiedler, Seth Saunders and Darrell Bechy who jump over the wall multiple times a race to keep Mears moving.

Robert "Bootie" Barker, GEICO Racing's crew chief, likens the race-team environment to that of a football team, with its emphasis on strategy combined with physical ability. Barker, 43, played football and baseball in high school until a car accident at the age of 17 left him in a wheelchair.

At the team's race shop in Mooresville, North Carolina, Barker greets visitors with an amiable, Virginia-accented "What's goin' on?" and a firm handshake. Trophy cases and large photos of drivers and race cars in the reception area lead to glass doors that open onto a white-walled shop with a checkered stripe running the length of the floor. NASCAR race

cars, each emblazoned with the GEICO logo and friendly Gecko are lined up on both sides, in various stages of construction and completion. Team members move around, greeting visitors as they pass. Classic rock blares from a radio in the fabrication shop. Barker remarks that occasionally fans will mill about the shop entrance, and he or someone else on the team will wave them in and give them a quick tour.

Barker joined Germain Racing (the shop and team that GEICO supports with its sponsorship) near the end of the 2009 race season, initially working with veteran sports car and open-wheel race driver Max Papis. Mears joined the team in 2010.

"We've been working together for several years, so you build an understanding of what and how you're trying to communicate," Mears says. "The team has grown

a lot from where we started."

"He's the quarterback and I'm the coach," Barker adds.

The team is still small by NASCAR standards (a staff of four engineers, including Barker, and 40 crew members—14 travel to each race—fielding a total of 13 cars, two of which are brought to each race, the primary and the backup car). In the early days, they didn't always have the money or equipment they needed to fully compete against the 42 other NASCAR race cars. If a mechanical problem came up during a race, for example, Barker would say to Mears: "There's no way we can fix it, but maybe we can MacGyver something to make it happen." He adds, "Sometimes it can be a waste of time, you don't always know. So, in that scenario opportunities for success are limited."

That has changed with GEICO's involvement. "GEICO supported us

more and more and now we have what we need to have."

In 2015, the GEICO Racing team entered its third year with full GEICO sponsorship. GEICO began sponsoring the team in 2008 and gradually increased its involvement. This year also marks the second year of its partnership with Richard Childress Racing (a NASCAR powerhouse, RCR also fields cars for drivers Ryan Newman, Austin Dillon and Paul Menard). RCR supplies engines as well as chassis, parts, fabrication and more to the GEICO team. For GEICO Racing, that means reduced costs along with access to top-notch equipment.

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Driver Casey Mears checks in with Barker

With the RCR partnership, Barker feels it's time for the GEICO team to "attack the competition"



Barker likens the race team environment to that of a football team

Despite its two championships in NASCAR's Camping World Truck Series, the GEICO team remains an underdog in the cutthroat Sprint Cup series. But both Barker and Mears have their sights set on checkered flags this year. With the RCR partnership, Barker feels it's time for the GEICO team to "attack the competition," especially on long, high-speed ovals such as the Daytona International Speedway and the Talladega Superspeedway (home of the GEICO 500 in May), on which Mears is particularly adept. They also plan to once again tap into Mears's road racing experience on tracks at Sonoma Raceway and Watkins Glen International. With his background in open-wheeled Indy cars and sports cars as well as NASCAR, Mears has a unique mix of skills that can shine during the often-grueling 38-race schedule.

While both men know the hard truth of motorsports—effort doesn't always equal results—they're confident that practice will make perfect.

Core Strength

While he admires the work of football coaches and business leaders, such as NASCAR's Chad Knaus and Ray Evernham, Robert "Bootie" Barker says he has no distinct management philosophy other than to "be who I am."

"He's a good judge of character and that's due to the good people he grew up with," says driver Casey Mears. "Everyone's a product of the people they were raised around. (He has) a good mix of grassroots judgment, common sense and character."

Growing up in Virginia, Barker was immersed in the world of NASCAR racing ("We would go to church, come home and have lunch and watch the race") but he wasn't "a car guy." He did have an interest in how machines work and a love of competition honed from his years playing football. He earned a mechanical engineering degree from Old Dominion University in Norfolk, Virginia, and became interested in motorsports while listening to late racing-legend-turned-broadcaster

Benny Parsons on a NASCAR broadcast talking about a shock engineer jumping from one team to another.

"I thought, hmm, I have the engineering degree. I could do something like that."

So, he started at the bottom, literally. After knocking on many doors and seeking out as many racing people as he could find, Barker finally got a helping hand. Harold Holly, a veteran NASCAR crew chief, made a phone call to Mike Beam (racer Bill Elliott's crew chief) that ended with Beam giving Barker a try in his team's race shop—cleaning toilets for no pay. Barker said he was happy to do it. "It meant I could put working for Bill Elliott on my resume," he says. "I had nothing to lose."

Now a crew chief himself, Barker expects the same work ethic and attitude in the people he hires. He looks for the "reed and the staff"—people who are flexible but strong, who will bend but won't break.

"The main thing I want them to know is that I'm the point man who can take the lead and take the heat when necessary. Those are the core values."

Over the Wall

Here's a typical workweek for the GEICO Racing NASCAR team:

Monday to Wednesday is spent at the Germain Racing/GEICO Racing shop in Mooresville, N.C. Thursday evening the team and cars arrive at the racetrack to prepare for the race on Sunday.

At the track, every crew member has an assigned task and crew chief Robert "Bootie" Barker meets with each of his managers as the race approaches. Barker will seek input from the team's two other engineers and driver Casey Mears on how to set up the car and prepare for the race. The race strategy itself takes into account hard information like track condition and weather, as well as intangibles such as what the other teams and drivers are doing. The specific ingredients of a race strategy are a closely held secret.

Friday until Sunday morning,

Barker will conduct team meetings and strategy sessions and oversee practice and race qualifying. Sunday, of course, is race day.

With 43 cars on the track often reaching close to 200 mph, the race requires stamina—both physical and mental—from the driver, as well as the ability to focus intently and multitask. "It's highly intense," says Mears. "Think of all the things you do on your daily drive to work and then multiply it by 100." Each member of the over-the-wall pit crew also needs to be physically strong and mentally able to cope with pressure, which is why the crew trains before and during each race season, practicing pit stops with precision and preparing mentally for the curves that can be thrown their way during a race.

During practice at the race shop, Jeff Knight, the pit crew coach, takes the team through its paces, barking out plays like a football coach. A typical play is: "Two laps, four tires, one down on left, drop on lugs"—meaning the car will enter the pits in

two laps, they'll replace all four tires, adjust the suspension on the left side of the car and drop the jack from beneath the car as the tire changer is tightening the lug nuts.

During the race, as the car approaches the pit lane, Mears and Barker will communicate via radio and decide what the crew will do to the car—whether it needs fuel, a full set of four new tires, some bodywork repairs, or all three. As Mears hits the pit lane and slows his car, Barker will communicate his directions to the crew so they know exactly what's expected of them. Sometimes, though—through communication with his driver or by watching other teams or by sheer gut instinct—Barker will take a different tack and change his call as the car is rolling toward them. The crew is expected to instantly switch gears, prepare for a different maneuver and still nail the pit stop in no more than 11 or 12 seconds, or about as long as it takes an average reader to finish this sentence. "We call that the Bootie play," Knight says. **G**

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Houston, Bristol-Johnson and Darrel Bechy practicing a pit stop