

MIKE AND KRISTA MARRER PHOTOS

THE PITS

A breakneck pace,
and timing is key

EDITOR'S NOTE: Michael J. Marrer is a free lance writer, who writes a motor sports column for the Press & Sun-Bulletin. He recently spent a day of the Summer 500 at Pocono International Raceway in the pits with the Hoss Ellington/Bull's-Eye Barbecue Sauce team.

By **MICHAEL J. MARRER**

Cliches. You can never seem to read or hear about the workings of a pit crew without running smack into them.

They say a pit crew has the grace and choreography of a ballet, and the precision of a military drill team.

All that is true. But first and foremost, it's simply hard work.

"It's physical work for the jack man and the fellows who change the tires," crewman Bobby Roberts said. "Each one of them are important, but a lot of people don't realize that the jack man is actually the limiting factor. That's a physical job and it takes a fellow who can hump it, who has a little meat on his bones."

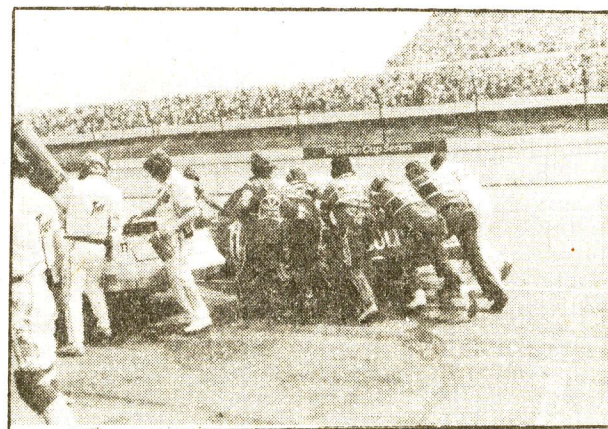
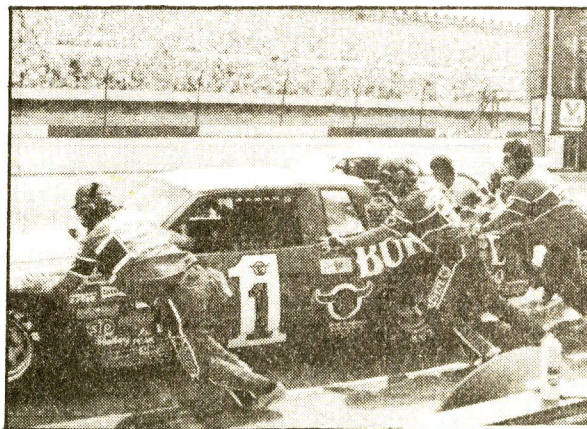
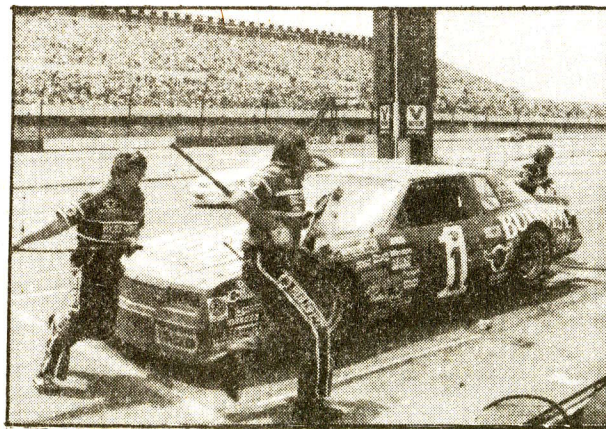
The crew tries to make the jack as light as possible, but it will still weigh over 35 pounds. That is quite a lot when you figure one man has to carry it around the car and place it accurately under the frame.

Jimmy Bennett has that responsi-

bility on race day. Robert Larkins and Max Bennett are the tire changers, Norman Chafin and Johnny Barnhill gas the car, and Gary Miller carries the tires. William Horrell holds the sign that helps driver Brett Bodine locate their pit stall.

You don't begin to appreciate the intricate timing necessary for a successful pit stop until you break it down into its respective components. The following takes place on a typical green-flag stop for two new tires and 22 gallons of fuel:

■ **0 seconds:** The car comes to a halt. Already, the front tire changer is kneeling by the right front fender, See PIT/Page 5C



Pit crew proud of pressure performance —

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air wrench in hand. The gas man inserts the first can of gas into the fuel opening in the left-rear fender, and the jack is placed under the car.

■ **1 second:** The rear tire changer is in position.

■ **2.5 seconds:** The tire carrier drops off the new front tire.

■ **5 seconds:** The car is fully jacked up, and the old front tire is pulled off.

■ **5.5 seconds:** Tire carrier drops off new rear tire.

■ **6 seconds:** The old rear tire is removed.

■ **7 seconds:** The first can of gas is empty.

■ **8 seconds:** Gas man inserts the second gas can.

■ **9 seconds:** Both new tires have been placed on the hubs, and the tire changers begin tightening lug nuts.

■ **14 seconds:** The tires are mounted, and the car is dropped off the jack.

■ **15 seconds:** The second gas can is emptied, and the car leaves the pits.

It may seem surprising to find that the Ellington crew prefers green-flag pit stops compared to what may appear to be the more relaxed atmosphere of a caution period. That's because

when the yellow flag comes out, everyone usually ducks into the pits, making it more congested on pit road.

"I'd rather do it under the green with less cars around anytime," crew chief "Runt" Pitman said. Besides, he said he feels his crew is one of the best around, and prefers the green flag to show off its superiority. With the speed of the cars, a second spent in the pits equals 300 feet on the race track.

Practice is something the team does not do often. The crew gets together and runs through its pit stops only in the off-season, or when someone is assigned to a new position. They find that the constant schedule of races is enough to keep them sharp.

Some members, however, find other ways to help improve their talents. On Saturday morning before qualifying at Pocono, the crew was in the garage area changing to a new set of tires, and Robert Larkins wasn't looking at what he was doing. Instead his gaze was focused over the hood of the car at the team in the stall next to him.

Yet his air wrench was finding almost every lug nut perfectly.

For Larkins, he uses opportunities such as this to learn the pattern.

"If you can do it without looking, you can do it even better when you do look at it," Larkins said.

Most of the members of the Ellington team have been together for quite some time, and Roberts said it helps to have people staying in the pit crew business as long as possible.

"It's like anything else," Roberts said. "The longer somebody does a given job, whenever something gets screwed up, people who have done it long enough can function better. They can work themselves out of a jam, where the fellow who may not have done it very much, something might get him all fumbled up and he won't know what to do."

The Ellington team is especially proud of one entry in the record book.

"Right now we hold the qualifying speed record (203.666 mph) at Daytona in July," Roberts said. "And it'll probably stand forever, because they're not going to run that fast (with the new engine rules)."

"How many people can lay claim to something like that?" he said. "That's not like just a bunch of dummies going down there and trying to do that. That's the best that there is in this line of work, and that's a hell of an accomplishment."

Keys to victories not all big names

By MICHAEL J. MARRER

Bobby Allison, Richard Petty and Darrell Waltrip.

These drivers are household names to those who follow the sport of stock car racing.

William Horrell, Jimmy Bennett and Norman Chafin.

These names will probably draw quizzical looks from even the most diehard race fan.

But their work is just as important as that of the drivers. They are three of the men who comprise the pit crews on the NASCAR Winston Cup circuit.

It was stop No. 17 for the NASCAR troops when they rolled into the Pocono International Raceway last month for the Summer 500. A weekend with the Hoss Ellington/Bull's-Eye Barbecue Sauce team gave some insight into these special people, who for the most part work outside the limelight.

"Why do I do it?" said rear tire changer Max Bennett, repeating the question. "I love it."

That wasn't always the case.

"I got into it by my cousin (Jimmy Bennett)," Bennett said. "He's been a fan all his life, ever since I can remember. He started taking me to the races with him after he got hooked up with Hoss. I've enjoyed it ever since."

Bennett, who joined the team full time in February, has varied responsibilities in the team's shop at Wilmington, N.C. "One day I may be in the motor room, the next day I may be in the middle of the shop putting the car together, and the next day I may be in the body room."

Bobby Roberts has been involved in racing since first joining Ellington in 1966. Roberts, the team's tire man, also assists with the engines during qualifying sessions. When he's not at the track, he runs an automobile glass shop—he's the third generation of his family

involved in that business.

Roberts downplays his importance to the team. Instead, he points to a man in a Bull's-Eye shirt who is intently working on the carburetor of a bright red Chevrolet. That man, crew chief Shelton "Runt" Pittman, is generally regarded as the catalyst for the team's successes.

"In this outfit the only reason that it ticks, the only reason that it amounts to anything, is on account of that fellow," Roberts said. "He is one of the few people in the entire garage area who can do anything that needs to be done to a race car to make it operate."

"And you can ask any of the fellows or anybody here in the garage area who's been around for any length of time, and they'll tell you the same thing."

Roberts said Pittman's all-encompassing knowledge is rare.

"Now there's lots of folks who are smart in part of the areas that have to do with race cars — motors, tires, setting it up, springs, whatever — but he does it all."

"He's an exceptional, self-taught fellow. And there ain't that many of them like that."

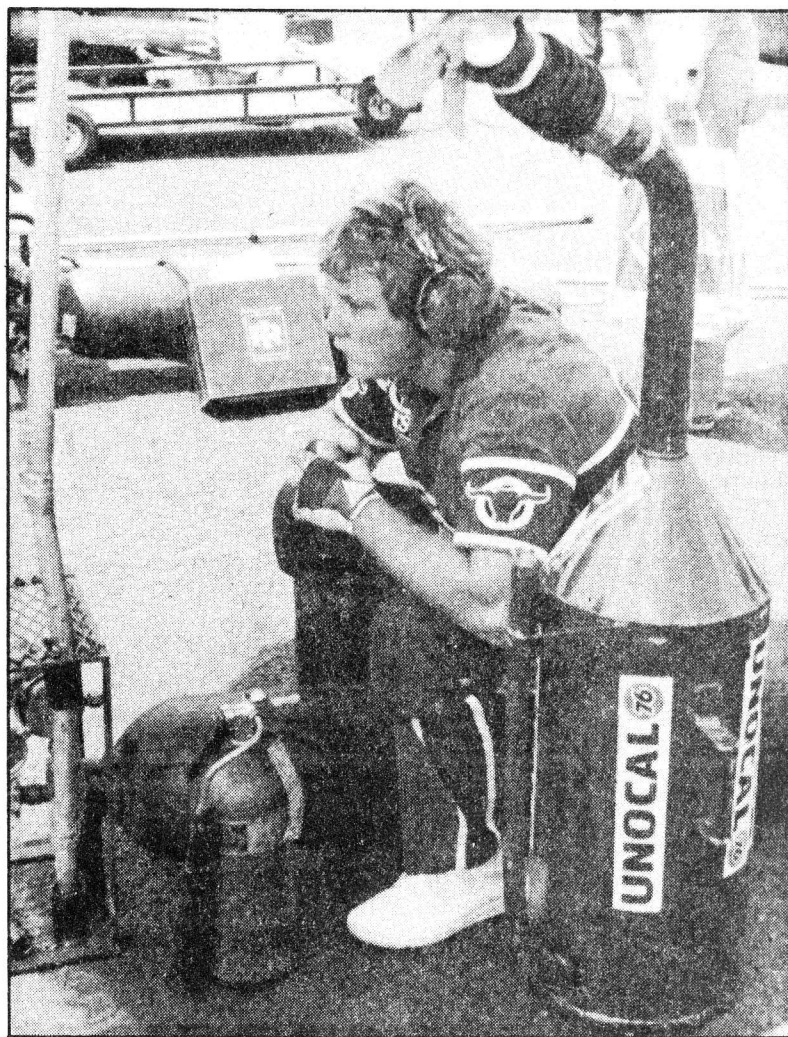
Pittman received numerous enticing offers from other teams during the off-season. Instead, he chose to remain with Ellington, his long-time friend.

"He could have gone anywhere he wanted to," Roberts said. "But he didn't have the slightest ambition to leave. His values are a little different than a lot of folks. His friends and the people he grew up with mean more to him than the money."

The closeness of the participants is a recurring theme when talking to these NASCAR crewmen.

"You meet some mighty nice people," Bennett said. "We're probably like one big family in racing, everybody gets along so good."

Said Roberts: "I'd say it's a little



Max Bennett concentrates on radio conversations between Brett Bodine and his pit crew.

more of a family-type atmosphere. "There are other teams that operate under the gun — more from a strictly business standpoint — no nonsense whatsoever."

"If we didn't operate the way that we operate now, most of us probably wouldn't be here. That's not to say that we don't (get serious). This team's record speaks for itself (five Winston Cup wins since 1976). Keep in mind that most of what Runt's accomplished through the years has been done with never any more than a two-person full-time pit crew."

The team ran well at Pocono, even leading the race after one round of pit stops. But the engine

on their car No. 1 blew on lap 174. The crew beat the rush and packed up their tools early. Still, they were not totally disappointed.

"The boys did a bang up job of what they were doing," Roberts said. "With all the goings on, we (only) had one failure, and that was an engine failure."

A few minutes later, another driver and his crew were enjoying a victory. For the Ellington team, like the others in the garage area, it was time to concentrate on the next race.

They'll be back another day to try again. The siren call beckons, and the love for their racing friends is too strong.