



It takes between 12 and a half and 13 seconds to change all four tires and fill up with fuel during a NASCAR pit stop. Note the pit wagon in the background. The official is there to make sure that all five lug nuts are securely attached. In the final picture, Brad Donaghy gives Kyle Busch the good-to-go sign.

mama of Joe Gibbs. "It's a great atmosphere." Brad calls it "a good family environment." It pays well too. "I bought a house two years ago," says Brad matter-of-factly. How many 23-year-olds do you know can say that?

Working for Joe Gibbs is also a lot of hard work. The hours are long and you'd better not make any plans for the weekends from late January until the end of November. During the week Brad is a front end mechanic for the Number 11 car, driven by Denny Hamlin. Even during the off season, "it's a regular job," he continues of his Monday through Thursday routine. "You go in there; you're a mechanic; you have to work on stuff. You have to develop new stuff and try new stuff in the wind tunnels...So, you've always got something to do. You can't worry about traveling on the weekends."

That's when he and the rest of the team jump on one of Joe Gibbs' two private planes and fly to the race, whether it's in Richmond, Virginia or Richmond, California. "Yeah, I'm enjoying it," nods Brad with a smile. "It's a lot of traveling and lot of work. You get a little bit of time at home, but not a lot, from all the traveling and stuff like that. It's a long season, but off-season, you just take time and take a lot of vacation." Earlier this year, Brad got married, but the newlyweds are saving the full wedding ceremony for this coming January when he has more time.

The other thing Brad does every day is practice with his seven-man team. "Every day," he confirms. "We do about five or six stops per practice and then

we have to go up and do 30 minutes of cardio and typically a strength work out."

This is a sport. Linebackers and offensive tackles like Brad make for good tire carriers. The changers, the guys with the air guns, are like wide receivers, nimble and lightning-fast. The jack man has to be

messes up, it pretty much hurts the whole team."

There are also injuries in this sport.

"Please don't say that," says Hope, tight-lipped, as she watches yet another NASCAR re-run. His Dad, Keith says, "You see 'em get hit all the time, fly up on the hood of a car." Hope winces and adds "I'm very tight when it comes to Bradley. I love him."

Down at the track, Bradley says he's never been hurt while a race was going on. "Changers typically have wrist and elbow problems from the gun and hitting lug nuts hard. Carriers it's typically lower back and legs. My back gets tight every once in awhile but I stretch it out and I haven't had a problem there." Just prior to the race, Bradley, Nick, and the other team members all stretch out and do warm-up exercises.

"To pull off good times every time, it's got to be perfect," notes Brad. "You'll have little mishaps here and there, it won't slow you down too much and you'll still have a good stop, but it wouldn't be as good as if you were clean throughout the stop."

Mishaps? "Like if you have to go back and hit an extra lug nut. Or when I index the tire, I miss just a little bit and have to rotate the tire to get the studs lined up. Just little things like that slow it down a little bit."

So that's the difference "between the mid 12s and low 13s."

The cars blister by. Brad and Nick do the good luck dap. Kyle comes in. They jump off the wall. The clock starts.

One-one thousand...two-one thousand... three-one thousand...



The pit crew team does a high-five after the singing of the National Anthem.

quick and strong, like a running back. The fuel man has to be able to hold steady 85 pounds of gasoline over his head. He might be a center.

"But it's totally different from any other sport," counters Brad. "It's all rhythm, and it's all chemistry with your changers and your crew guys. Everybody's in sync. It's like a little dance out there. If one person



"Between the mid 12s and the low 13s"

The last thing Brad Donaghy does before he jumps off the wall is a knuckle-to-knuckle good luck dap with his partner Nick Odell. It's a little bit superstition and a whole lot psyching each other up.

One-one thousand...two-one thousand... "When they come in for the pit, you've got your tires all laid out on the wall. You've got your right and your left," says Donaghy, ticking off the pit stop routine. "You always jump off the wall with your right side first. You only jump off the wall, when the car hits one pit stall away. So you jump off as the car comes in. And he stops, that's when everybody jumps in position."

The jack man goes first, followed by Nick with the air gun, followed by Brad with the 65-pound right front tire. They run right in front of the still-moving racecar. Kyle Busch brakes to a stop pretty close to the red tape marker they put down on the tarmac before the race started. The rear tire changer and carrier have sprinted out from behind the car, followed by the fuel man with his 85-pound gas can. He inserts the nozzle as the catch-can man inserts the prong that opens the valve.

Three-one thousand...four-one thousand... Whree-whree-whree-whree-whree, the air guns whine. Nick "hits all five lug nuts off, pulls it off." The tire is rolled to the side. Gas flows in at the back.

Five-one thousand... six-one thousand... "I put the tire on." And because of carefully placed tape, it lines up perfectly with the wheel studs. The guys in back are doing the



Above, poised on the pit stall wall with his right front tire at the ready, Orange County High School graduate, Bradley Donaghy looks for Kyle Busch to come in. At left, Brad Donaghy played linebacker and offensive tackle for the Fighting Hornets. His experience as an athlete has helped him become a champion tire carrier for Kyle Busch's Number 18 car.

same thing. Whree-whree-whree-whree-whree. Just that fast, Nick attaches the new tire, as Brad rolls the old tire to the wall. A crew member behind the wall lifts it over and out of the way. The jack man lowers the right side and sprints around to the left side of the car.

*Seven-one thousand...eight-one thousand...*



Hope and Keith Donaghy tape every NASCAR race in which their son has worked as a tire carrier.

"You grab your new left side tire, and when all that's going on, all the changers are running to the left side." They make sure the air hose doesn't snag or trip them up. The jack man lifts the left side. Gas continues to flow in at the back.

*Nine-one thousand...ten-one thousand...*

The air guns scream again. "They take the left sides off, put the left side on." Whree-whree-whree-whree-whree. That's 10 loosening and 10 tightening total. Lug nuts are bouncing all over the place. Nobody cares; they'll be swept up later. Brad rolls the left side tire to the wall. He wipes the grill of the car to remove track debris that could make the car overheat.

*Eleven-one thousand...twelve-one thousand...*

Gas is now flowing into the catch can, meaning the tank is full. The valve is closed. The jack man lowers the car and

Brad gives the good-to-go sign. Kyle Busch floors it.

"Uh, between the mid 12s and low 13s," laconically replies Kyle Busch's front tire carrier and Orange County High School graduate Bradley Donaghy. That's how long all that takes: 12.5 to 13.2 seconds. And hey, that was just a routine pit stop for Joe Gibbs Racing and the Number 18 car.

TV screen during a taped pit change.

It's not that he's a tire carrier for one of the most successful NASCAR teams today. It's not that he gets to travel all over the country to races or that he's on a first name basis with the likes of superstars like Kyle Busch. It's not that he regularly appears on network TV in the nation's most popular spectator sport. It's the fact that he's the best at what he does. Brad Donaghy is the best tire carrier in all of NASCAR!

Don't believe it? Take a look at this. There is a competition, held every year in the Charlotte Bobcats arena that pits pit crews against each other. It's called the Pit Crew Challenge. Pit crews race each other doing a change and then they have to push a race car something like 20 yards.

In 2008 and again just this past May, Brad and his tire changer Nick Odell, his knuckle-dapping partner and best friend won, yes, won the individual championship for a two-man carrier-changer team. They beat everybody. Listen to what Breon Klopp says. He's the senior director of development for Performance Instruction Training (PIT for short). "What separates champions from the collective student group is the level of dedication and drive to make the most of the opportunities provided. Brad is certainly one of those individuals who has excelled beyond his own expectations by working hard every day."

Something like that does not go unnoticed in those racecar garages ringing Charlotte, NC. If you want to be number one at this sport, you get the best: the best driver, the best car, the best crew chief, the best mechanics, the best pit crew with the best tire carrier that money can buy. That's why Joe Gibbs Racing came in first, second, third and fourth at Richmond International Raceway a few weeks ago...because it has the best of all of those components.

So, how did a three-letter man, who played both ways for the Fighting Hornets, wind up here in this, the biggest league of all, in car racing? It started with Will Likins' VOAG class at OCHS. He invited a representative from the NASCAR Technical Institute in Mooresville, NC to talk to his kids about career opportunities.

Was Bradley interested in becoming a mechanic? "No," his parents respond simultaneously. "He's always been an ath-

lete...There was never a weekend when we were home. It was always baseball or football," continues the proud Mom. But fooling with cars? Nah.

Bradley confirms this, adding, "I just decided to go to a tech school instead of a regular four-year university. Save me money in the long run. I was in and out of there inside a year and a half and while my friends were going into their third year of college, I was making money."

Then he noticed a night school called Pit Crew U, where you could learn how to do this type of thing. Pretty soon he was in the minor leagues of car racing, traveling in a van to little tracks. "Just pick-up gigs," says Hope. "Whenever somebody needed to pit



Even when he was a little kid, Brad Donaghy was crazy about sports. He graduated from Orange County High School in 2005, earning letters in football, baseball and wrestling.

a car, he would go... shorter tracks and younger kids, first getting started."

His first team was Ginn Racing with Joe Nemechek. Then he moved to Roush Racing, and then in 2008, he signed on with Joe Gibbs, which for a diehard Redskins fan, was akin to coming home to mama. He couldn't be happier.

"They are so good to the boys," says his

## Gentlemen, start your engines

"You better get some ear plugs," advises Hope Donaghy. "It's very loud."

That is an understatement. At the entrance to the tunnel that leads under the race track to the pits and garages inside the 3/4-mile oval at Richmond, a large sign says "Hearing Protection Required." Even during qualifying, when only one car is running at a time, it is deafening. All conversation is suspended as it blasts by.

At this particular race, the pit crew shows up around mid-afternoon, Friday. The first thing they do is prep the wheels by sanding burrs off of the hub and lug holes. Then they set up the pit wagon, which is a marvel of engineering and gadgetry. It is a portable tool shed, communications facility, air compressor, refreshment stand, and elevated observation platform complete with comfy seats, TVs, satellite hookups, and race radios.

As they work, they banter good naturedly with competing crews. Greetings and ribbings are equally exchanged between friends and fellow graduates of Pit Crew U. Their job setting up the buggy done, the boys head back to the massive Joe Gibbs tractor trailer truck and disappear inside. Tantalizing fumes from an outdoor grill testify that dinner tonight will include New York strip steaks, mashed potatoes and corn.

Just prior to the race, the crew re-emerges, dressed in black and red Nomex fire-retardant uniforms, bearing the names of various sponsors, like Z-line Furniture. Tonight is the Nationwide race. It is only moderately crazy here. Tomorrow will be totally nuts. The Number 18 Toyota is painted, a frankly god-awful pink shade of lavender (or is it the other way around) and decorated with all manner of cutesy, cuddly animals like kittens and bunny rabbits. Even the crew chief is wearing the same shade of coveralls. Brad says something about a contest open to the public to decorate the car. Whatever...This paint scheme is totally incongruous with this loud, raucous, macho machine that can do a buck and a half on the back straight. By the way, these cars get 4-1/2 miles to the gallon, which means one tank will last about 60 laps.

Before the race starts, it is a media feeding fren-

zy with TV crews and photographers and poster children and drivers' girlfriends and wanna-bees, hangers-on and has-beens. Kyle Busch's fiancé makes a grand entrance in her four-inch pink heels, stretch jeans that she has been poured into, tight pink T, and fawning film crew in tow. She gingerly climbs the ladder to the observation plat-



The Nationwide series Number 18 car's paint scheme belies it's power. This car came in third at the Friday night race in Richmond.

form on the pit buggy and takes her place next to the crew chief.

The pit crew, all seven of them, line up and take off their ball caps as someone sings God Bless America. They bow their heads and say a prayer. Someone else sings the National Anthem. They all high-five each other and go into a huddle as a woman who could be Whoopi Goldberg's twin sister leads them in a cheer. And then those ominous words: "Gentlemen start your engines." And from that point on you may as well forget it because you can't hear anything at all with or without ear plugs.

Kyle Busch tonight is starting out in sixth position. According to Brad, he likes to run his car "loose," which means it has a tendency to dive in on the turns with the back end sliding out. Other drivers prefer "tight," which means the car is harder to steer and drifts towards the outside of the track. But for Kyle, "loose is fast," says Brad; "tight is slow."

During a pit stop, they are all connected by

radio to the crew chief, spotter and driver. But they keep their mouths shut, unless they have to report and repair damage to the right side of the car which the crew chief can't see. Only seven men are allowed over the wall at one time: two tire carriers, front and rear; two tire changers, front and rear; a jack man, a gas can man, and a catch can man.

Brad explains. "There's a little spout in the back of the car and his little catch can is just an empty little can, and it's got a little prong in it. And you go in there and hit a flapper valve. The flapper valve opens up air to the system. As you plug it (the gas can) in, fuel goes through the entire system...There's an overflow tube, and when the gas fills up the tank in the car, the fuel comes all the way out to the catch can. As soon as he sees fuel spewing in his can, he waves off to the jack man that he can drop the jack and send the car." Ooooooookay.

In the Nationwide race, Kyle Busch finishes third. I ask Brad, will he go out and party tonight?

"No!" he says emphatically, adding that he has to be fresh for tomorrow's race. Will you party tomorrow night?

"No....you fly home. You fly home that night."

Even if you win?  
"Even if you win, you fly home that night."

The following night, in the more prestigious Sprint Cup, Kyle works his way up from 32nd to finish second in his signature M and M's-sponsored blue, yellow and red car. He even made a pretty good run at Denny Hamlin until he ran out of tires, cooked his rotors and had to back off a little bit. Not a bad weekend for Joe Gibbs Racing.

Not a bad weekend for Bradley Donaghy either. During the week he's a front end mechanic for Denny Hamlin who won Saturday's race. He worked as a tire changer for Kyle Busch both Friday night when he finished third, and Saturday night when he finished second. And both those nights saw record few cautions, which means drivers couldn't use the yellow to come in and have a more leisurely pit stop. They pitted under green... losing places for every millisecond you're in.

So, Brad Donaghy played a direct role in Joe Gibbs' first, second- and third-place finishes over the weekend. But that's what you'd expect from the best.