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PIT CREWS RACE THE CLOCK

Pit crews can make or break drivers' runs

By Ben Miraski | Special to the Chicago Tribune
July 14, 2008

Along the wall, gunfire sounds. The men standing on the wall are ready to charge with the signal. Tension mounts as they see their target exit the corner and enter the road. In a flash, they jump to action.

This isn't a battle in some faraway war. This is the life of a NASCAR pit crew.

As the cars peel out of their stalls, laying down a heavy coat of tire rubber, smoke hovers in the air, its pungent smell wafting toward the crowd.

"I love that smell!" a fan shrieks as she stands behind the M&M's pit crew, which helped Kyle Busch to a dramatic victory in Saturday night's LifeLock.com 400 at Chicagoland Speedway.

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To stand behind the pits at a Sprint Cup race is to enter another world. The men in these pits are athletes. In one pit stop, they can change four tires, fill a tank with gas and clean the windshield in a heartbeat. Any small slip will cost their team valuable places on the track ... and prize money.

From the outside, they look like a team of misfits. Crew members wear all manner of helmets, including some that look better suited for roller derby.

During a stop, the number of men over the wall is limited, so other members pass forward replacement items. A short crew member hangs over the wall, passing forward near-side tires. An associate holds him to make sure he doesn't fall into the pit box. It's almost a mechanized circus act, complete with a cast

of real characters.

Take Doug Ingold, the "gas man" for Jamie McMurray's No. 26 Crown Royal Ford Fusion. Ingold looks like he might be a better fit behind a grill than toting gas cans. With a full beard, a black bandanna splashed with purple accents and a black Simpsons apron, he is the quintessential barbecue man.

But without Ingold, a 12-year pit veteran, McMurray's car doesn't go. He dons a heavy protective helmet, carries an 80-pound can and refuels the car at each stop.

The tire men have their own jobs, scraping debris off the spent tires and measuring the wear based on holes they have drilled in the tires before the race.

Between pit stops, the crew stands in front of a flat screen and watches a tape, filmed from above. They critique themselves and figure out how to improve on their impossibly fast times. Every second is crucial, considering the cars circle the 1 1/2-mile oval at Chicagoland in about 30 seconds.

"Fifteen laps to pit. Anything you want us to work on?" crew chief Larry Carter says to McMurray over the radio. His race isn't going well. A cut tire earlier in the race cost him crucial time and position.

Carter promises to fix a balky radio and encourages McMurray, saying: "You're running well. You'd be in fourth if it weren't for that [expletive] cut tire."

At Chicagoland, most crews were taking about 50 laps between stops. That gives the men some time to contemplate their next plan of attack.

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But the call to arms can come at any time, sometimes catching men back in the garage and resulting in a sprint back down the narrow walk behind the pits.

Places on the wall are taken. The guns fire, and it's organized chaos all over again.

•Busch, 23, won Saturday for the seventh time in Sprint Cup competition and the 14th time in NASCAR's three divisions this season.

His margin of victory over [Jimmie Johnson](#) was .159 seconds, and he added 195 points to his Sprint Cup total. McMurray was 21st.

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