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MIKE 'BUGA' BUGAREWICZ: Crew Chief, No. 14 Ford Fusion

Pronunciation: (Bugga-ravich)
Birthdate: Jan. 22, 1982
Birthplace: Lehigh, Pennsylvania
Hometown: Lehigh, Pennsylvania
Residence: Concord, North Carolina
Spouse: Krysten
Children: Zachary
Education: Penn State University – (B.S. in 2004, M.S. in 2005 – mechanical engineering with a minor in material science mechanics)

The day was Sunday, March 20, 2005, and Mike “Buga” Bugarewicz still remembers it like it was yesterday.

He sat on the couch in his college apartment at Penn State University watching the FOX television broadcast of the Monster Energy NASCAR Cup Series race from Atlanta Motor Speedway when Carl Edwards edged Jimmie Johnson by .028 of a second in a classic side-by-side NASCAR finish.

At the time, Bugarewicz was a graduate student studying mechanical engineering and doing research for the Navy through Applied Research Laboratories. When he wasn’t at school, he would spend his weekends working on and racing his own Street Stock and Late Model racecars. He also helped a friend compete on the NASCAR Whelen Modified Tour.

The research program at school was rewarding, but Bugarewicz was getting the itch to do more in life.

He’d grown up in Lehigh, Pennsylvania, playing on the high school football, wrestling and track-and-field teams. He also spent a lot of time watching his father race at Mahoning Valley (Pa.) Speedway and working on cars at his father’s business long before he even owned a driver’s license.

Engineering was going to be his career after graduation, but racing was his passion. It was time to do something.

The thrilling Atlanta victory not only launched Edwards’ career, it pushed Bugarewicz to embark on a path that led him to one of the highest-profile jobs in his profession – crew chief for Stewart-Haas Racing (SHR) and driver Tony Stewart in his final NASCAR season.

After guiding Stewart to a victory at Sonoma (Calif.) Raceway and a berth in the Chase for the NASCAR Cup in his first season as a crew chief in 2016, Bugarewicz oversees the No. 14 team’s transition to driver Clint Bowyer and a new manufacturer in Ford in 2017.

It all started with a race broadcast.

“During the broadcast back in 2005, Darrell (Waltrip), Larry (McReynolds) and Mike (Joy) were talking about the importance of engineering in NASCAR and how much the sport was relying on engineering to make the cars safer and faster,” Bugarewicz said more than 10 years after the race aired. “Their conversation got me thinking that my engineering degree could open up an opportunity to get in the door.”

On a whim, Bugarewicz drove to Charlotte in October, knocked on doors at several race shops and passed out resumes in hopes he would get in the sport. A few weeks after returning home, job offers arrived over the phone, and soon after he loaded all his possessions and drove to North Carolina to begin his NASCAR life.

He started at Roush Racing in December 2005, playing an engineering role across all of Roush’s NASCAR programs during the 2006 season. He worked with Danny O’Quinn in the NASCAR Xfinity Series while also working with the NASCAR Cup Series teams and part-time NASCAR Camping World Truck Series effort. From 2007 through 2009, Bugarewicz worked with David Ragan in the NASCAR Cup Series. In 2010, he stayed within the Roush family and worked on the No. 98 NASCAR Cup Series team with Paul Menard as part of the team’s alliance with Richard Petty Motorsports.

Roush moved Bugarewicz to the No. 17 NASCAR Cup Series team in 2011 where his race-engineering skills aided Matt Kenseth. Kenseth visited victory lane six times over the next two seasons, posting top-10 finishes in the season-ending standings.

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Rookie driver Ricky Stenhouse Jr. took over for Kenseth in the No. 17 in 2013, and at roughly the same time Bugarewicz starting seriously thinking of expanding his horizons. With limited opportunities at Roush, Bugarewicz took Rodney Childers' offer to join him and driver Kevin Harvick as the lead race engineer for the No. 4 team at SHR.

Under Childers' guidance and with Harvick's abilities, the team dominated the 2014 season, winning five races and capturing the NASCAR Cup Series championship. The team nearly repeated the feat in 2015, winning three races and finishing second in the title chase.

For Bugarewicz, the lessons learned at SHR involve more than just statistics. They include picking the brain of SHR Director of Competition Greg Zipadelli, who owns two championships and 34 wins as a crew chief, while working with Childers and Tony Gibson (No. 41 crew chief) as they provide him with the support and guidance to excel in his role.

"There is no position that has evolved more over the years in NASCAR than the crew chief position," Bugarewicz said. "When I first started, the crew chief was the expert when it came to anything on the racecar. Today, it is the crew chief's job to assemble a team of specialized individuals and utilize the information they provide to produce the best product for competition."

Bugarewicz points out those specialists are still human beings.

"What I learned in 2016 is my job is as much about managing people as it is about knowing every nut and bolt on the car," he said. "Not everyone is always going to have good days and you have to know how to manage each person. That's a tough job, but I feel more comfortable after a year's experience. You never stop learning, so I hope I will grow as much in 2017 as I did in 2016."

Beyond his years of higher education and the wisdom garnered from NASCAR peers, Bugarewicz said the principles ingrained in him by his parents and grandparents have had the greatest impact on his life.

Becoming the crew chief for a future NASCAR Hall of Famer is a daunting task. To do it as a rookie crew chief in the driver's final NASCAR season adds another degree of difficulty. Throw in a preseason injury to that Hall of Fame driver which forces the rookie crew chief to use interim drivers for the season's first eight races and you're faced with a situation some would call insurmountable.

Not Bugarewicz. The work ethic and determination honed in his Pennsylvania upbringing prepared him for all of the above when just days before the start of the 2016 season, Stewart sustained a back injury in an all-terrain vehicle accident. A burst fracture of the L1 vertebra kept Stewart out of what would have been his final Daytona 500 and the ensuing seven races. In his place during this period were Brian Vickers and Ty Dillon, who split time in the No. 14 machine until Stewart's return April 24 at Richmond (Va.) International Raceway.

Bugarewicz deftly managed the situation and upon getting Stewart back behind the wheel of the No. 14, helped the three-time NASCAR Cup Series champion earn five top-five finishes and eight top-10s, one of which was a win at Sonoma thanks to some sharp pit strategy by Bugarewicz and tenacious driving by Stewart. It was the 49th and final victory of Stewart's illustrious NASCAR career and it propelled Stewart into the Chase for the NASCAR Cup where he finished 15th, just 11 points shy of advancing to the Round of 12.

Bugarewicz, who was the only rookie crew chief in the Chase field in 2016, now turns his attention to Bowyer, whose eight career victories and second-place finish in the 2012 Chase is testament to his driving abilities.

"I think you are going to see a highly motivated Clint Bowyer at SHR in 2017," Bugarewicz said. "It wasn't that long ago he was battling for a championship. I know with SHR equipment, Ford and our No. 14 crew, we'll give him the tools to show how good he can be. He and I talked a lot in 2016 and I know how eager he is to get in our racecar."

When those expectations are realized, the television announcers who provided the motivation to send a certain Pennsylvanian to North Carolina in search of a NASCAR career will likely spend a great deal of their time talking about the resurgent Bowyer and his second-year crew chief Mike Bugarewicz.