

Lisa Smokstad: Always Asking Questions

The phrase that comes up most often in a discussion with Lisa Smokstad is “I just kept asking questions”. Every discovery starts with a question. Asking the right questions is what makes Lisa an invaluable part of Hendrick Motorsports.



Lisa didn't plan a career in racing. She worked at a race track on weekends and was a spectator at Late Model races her brother-in-law was competing in. One day, the crew was short people and Lisa was drafted to handle tires for the car. She kept working as a tire specialist during the weekends while completing a degree in psychology at the University of Minnesota and, after graduating in 1992, working.

In 1996, she went on the road full time as tire specialist for her brother-in-law's ASA (American Speed Association) car. She moved to working on Kenny Schrader's Late Model and ASA teams, and, starting in 1999, with Hendrick Motorsports. She's been a tire specialist for all three of NASCAR's top series, including being part of three championship teams. She's managed tires for Brian Vickers, Kyle Busch, Casey Mears, Jeff Gordon, Jimmie Johnson and Dale Earnhardt Jr.

Things changed for Lisa and husband Craig in 2007 when they welcomed daughter RaElla. (Craig is the car chief for Red Bull Racing's No. 83.) Although she still jumps in when needed on any of the four Hendrick Motorsports teams and goes on the road for testing, the focus of her job has shifted to coordinating tire data from the HMS teams and—as you might expect—asking questions about what they might do to make their cars faster.

What Does a Tire Specialist Do?

At the track, I get the tires, remove the air Goodyear fills them with and re-fill them with dry nitrogen gas. I match them into sets of four according to when the tires were made and their physical properties such as circumference and spring rate (how hard the tires resist being compressed). Before the tires go on the car, I check the pressure and thickness of the tread for each tire, and I measure temperature, wear and pressure after the tires come off the car.

At the shop, I'll coordinate data from the tire specialists for all four Hendrick Motorsports teams and enter it in a database. I like looking through all the data and trying to find patterns—anything that might give us an advantage at the track. I debrief the tire specialists to learn about things that might not show up in the numbers—something they might have noticed about a particular set of tires, for example. Later in the week, I'll spend time studying our database to see if I can find patterns or trends that may be important for the next race.

Statistics

NAME: Lisa Smokstad

POSITION: Tire Specialist, Hendrick Motorsports

FAMILY: Husband Craig, Daughter RaElla

EDUCATION: Bachelors degree (Psychology), University of Minnesota

EMPLOYMENT: Started as a tire specialist with her brother-in-law's ASA team; moved to Kenny Schrader's Late Model and ASA teams, followed by employment at Hendrick Motorsports since 1999. She worked in the NASCAR Camping World Truck Series and the NASCAR Nationwide Series before moving to the NASCAR Sprint Cup Series.

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About Lisa

One course I didn't take in school that I wish I would have taken now is... Philosophy. Philosophy is like psychology, but broader. So much of this job is understanding the people involved. On the road especially, we're around each other so much that it's

like summer camp. You have to be able to appreciate why people do things, what's going to set off other people. I think philosophy gives you a big-picture view of things.

My favorite part of my job is... Winning. I like the competition—the potential to win. I like knowing that I made a difference that



“I like to learn, which is probably why I ask so many questions. I want to be the best I can at whatever I do.”

helped us win. That was one of my concerns about changing my job when I had Raella. If I couldn't really contribute—I mean really make a difference—I didn't want the job.

My least favorite part of my job is... Losing. There's nothing as bad as watching your car struggle.

The most challenging part of my job is... The physical aspects of it, no doubt. A wheel and tire weigh about 65 lbs. When I'm at the track, I deal with maybe sixteen sets of four tires each. I have to move sixty or seventy tires all over the garage and the pits during a weekend.

Something I wish someone would have told me when I was in school... Things will turn out OK. I think when you're young, you worry a lot about things, but in the end, things really do work out.

Getting There

Q: Did you like math and science when you were in school? A: I took every math class I could and still finish my degree in psychology. I loved math.

Q: What did you want to be when you were in school? I'm not sure I knew exactly, but I knew I wanted to do something that would help people.

Q: Is there someone in your life who served as a role model? There were a number of people who have mentored me, but what they all had in common was that they were willing to answer my questions—and (laughs) I ask a **lot** of questions. The ultimate mentor is my husband, Craig, who probably gets more questions than anyone else just because he's around me more. We can't talk about specifics now because we work for different teams, but he knows a lot and he's always willing to share what he knows.

When I'm not working, I like to... (laughs) Boy, that's changed since the baby arrived. I love spending time with her. I like coaching gymnastics, although that's gotten a little harder to do now that RaElla is starting to be mobile. That makes it a little harder to take her to the gym. When she gets older, I'd like to volunteer. I used to be a Guardian Ad Litem, which is a person who is appointed by a judge to represent a child's best interests in divorce or abuse cases and I'd like to do that again eventually.

The best advice for a student who wants to work in motorsports is... Go to a short track and volunteer to work on a car. They'll love you for volunteering. Learn about every part of the car, how everything works. It'll help you get used to the grind of being on the road, and you'll learn a lot. And ask a lot of questions!