

Tommy Wheeler: Back to Basics

A snowstorm and a summer job changed Tommy Wheeler's career plans. Growing up working on a farm in Rockingham North Carolina, Tommy was a high-school football standout who

knew he wanted to design bridges for a living. He was about to accept an athletic scholarship to the University of West Virginia, but a spring snowstorm during a visit and a desire to be closer to his family made him change his mind at the last moment. He instead went to Davidson



College, located just north of Charlotte, with the intention of getting a physics degree and then transferring to MIT or Duke for a graduate engineering degree.

Tommy had worked on drag racers with his father, so he was a natural when a summer internship at Hendrick Motorsports became available. Tommy continued working at Hendrick Motorsports while pursuing his physics studies. He eventually became a race engineer, which meant traveling every weekend while trying to finish his degree. By the time he should have been headed off to pursue a masters degree in engineering, he realized that a graduate degree was unlikely to teach him anything he couldn't learn on the job.

Although many people in motorsports have engineering degrees, Tommy believes his physics degrees gives him an advantage. "If you understand the basics," he says, "you can figure out just about anything."

"You have to be a little stoic. Even when you have a historic season, you're still going to lose more races than you win."

Statistics

NAME: Tommy Wheeler

POSITION: Technical Director, Evernham Engine Technology and Director of Engineering Services, Richard Petty Motorsports.

FAMILY: Wife Jill, twins born October 2008

EDUCATION: Bachelors degree in Physics, Davidson College, 1998

EMPLOYMENT: Started as a summer intern with Hendrick Motorsports while still in college; moved with Ray Evernham in 2000 to develop and get engines approved for Dodge's re-entry into NASCAR.

On The Job

Q: What do you do at Gillett Evernham Motorsports? My role is providing the crew chiefs with a car that is 90% of the way there. They have to figure out that last 10% at the track. I keep an eye on the big picture. There are a lot of things we could try, but we don't have time to try them all. I figure out where we can put our effort so that it will yield the biggest gains on the track.

Q: Why engines? When I started out, I was on the road a lot. I liked the aspect of working against the clock, having to make quick decisions. I didn't like spending so much time on planes and eating fast food. Working on the engine side of things allows me to keep the things I liked about being on the road without actually being on the road.

Q: What would you do if you weren't working in motorsports? I started a company (Wheels Reels, Inc.) that makes carbon-fiber fishing rods and accessories. It got started when someone told me I couldn't do something—in this case, make a fishing rod from carbon fiber. So I did it just to prove him wrong.

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About Tommy

The most important thing I learned in high school was... How to work with a diversity of people. In athletics, for example, there are people with different backgrounds, different physical

levels, different mental levels, different motivations.

It is good practice for making you resilient. I think that's my strongest trait: resilience.



“Be exceptional at something. Don’t be average. Average is not rewarded and, in racing, it’s not even tolerated. There is no room for average.”

My favorite part of my job is... Working without a safety net. We don't have a textbook to look up answers in: We're

writing the textbook. Sometimes we have to make decisions without having all the information we need. Then we just have to sit back and wait to see if we made the right decisions.

My least favorite part of my job is... Dealing with people who don't see things with a broad enough scope. Sometimes, I have to explain to someone that we're not going to be able to do something they want to do. I have to explain how it fits in with a lot of other projects across the company, but the person I'm talking to only sees that their project is not going forward.

The most challenging part of my job is... You're putting yourself in harm's way emotionally every week. You get judged 36 times a year and even when you have a historic season, you're going to lose more races than you're going to win. You tend to limit the highs because that lets you limit the lows too. When we (Gillett Evernham Motorsports) were having a tough year in 2007, we all looked at each other and wondered if we were ever going to win again—and it had only been six months since our last win.

When I'm not working, I like to... Hunt and fish. I love salt water surf fishing. You stand in the sand, put bait on a line and throw it in the water and try to catch striped bass or sharks, or whatever's around.

The best advice for a student who wants to work in motorsports is... Don't study automotive stuff. Be exceptional at the basics. If you understand the basics, you can figure out the rest. Push yourself. Find something you're not good at and try to make yourself better at it. Most importantly, don't be average. Average is not rewarded in life and it's not even tolerated in racing. There is no room for average.

Getting There

Q: Did you like math and science when you were in school? A: Science and math came easy to me, but I wasn't a straight-A student by any means. I was one of those students the teachers were always frustrated with because they knew I could have done more.

Q: What did you want to be when you were in school? I wanted to be a civil engineer and build bridges. I really liked the idea of working outside.

Q: Is there someone in your life who served as a role model? Aside from my parents, who were big influences, there was a teacher in high school named Mr. Linton. He was a retired Air Force pilot who went back to college when he was 55 years old on the GI Bill—can you imagine going back to school at that age? He may have had the most profound impact on me. When he talked, you had to listen. He probably told me a hundred things that I probably didn't pay enough attention to.