

PERFORMING UNDER PRESSURE (1) – UNDERSTANDING WHAT IS HAPPENING

Performing under pressure particularly in qualifying is 'The' big performance opportunity for all drivers and this is where we spend most of our time in training at iZone.

A lot of drivers can't understand how in testing they perform well but when it comes to qualifying they consistently under-perform. On the face of it, there is very little difference between testing and qualifying (one is still driving the same car on the same track) - but when one looks deeper there are two areas where there is a significant difference – how drivers train for and how they mentally approach a qualifying session.

1) When drivers train in their home sim or in testing it is not generally focused on qualifying – Both on their home sims and in testing drivers spend most of their time pounding round on long runs just focused on getting a quicker lap time – if they make a mistake they mentally abandon that lap knowing that they have another lap, and another lap, and another lap, etc. and it is this that leads to challenges when it comes to qualifying:

- In qualifying they now they have a limited number of laps in which to perform and every lap counts.
- Long runs in testing are what we would call 'Rhythm Based Performance' where drivers keep going round and round until they drop into a good lap time (almost without thinking).
- In qualifying there is no time to get comfortable and build rhythm – it is 'Intensity based' where drivers have to make it happen – for example in British GT4 drivers only have 2 laps in which to do a time before the tyre is over its peak.
- Crucially as drivers have practiced at a low intensity level they are not used to the high intensity of short qualifying runs:
 - i. It's un-practiced - and it is a bad policy to put pressure on a skill that has not been practiced over and over again as it will break down very quickly.
 - ii. As a result of this pressure drivers start to think about what they are doing and this can either lead to over-driving (trying too hard) or under-driving (being cautious so as not to make mistakes)
- Additionally, in qualifying drivers also have to adapt to change very quickly and again this is not necessarily practiced in training:
 - i. Track grip/conditions can have changed over night or more rubber may have gone down during the day.
 - ii. The car may handle differently on new tyres.
 - iii. New tyres will have more grip and drivers have to adapt to it immediately and catch the peak of the tyre grip.
 - iv. Drivers also have to deal with interruptions – traffic, yellow and red flags – further affecting rhythm and reducing the time available
- The good thing is that all of these areas can be quite quickly addressed in your training and in how you structure testing.

2) Mental approach to qualifying:

- Every driver knows how critical qualifying is to a successful weekend, especially for single seater drivers.
- Under this pressure drivers can quickly lose focus on what they can do (and have done) and their focus switches to worrying about the consequence of it not going right for them:
 - i. They start to compare themselves with other drivers – can' I do this
 - ii. They will remember bad experiences they have had in qualifying in the past
 - iii. Maybe free practice didn't go that well
 - iv. They think about what their team will think if they fail
 - v. They don't want to disappoint their family and sponsors
 - vi. Critically their goal may not be in alignment with their current skill/experience level – so they are setting themselves up for failure before they have even started.
- These mental pressures will add considerably to the temptation to push harder and over/under-drive.
- Unlike making technical changes to your training and testing – making improvements with your mental approach and mental strength takes a lot of time and dedication.

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So how can YOU learn to perform better 'Mentally' under pressure?

- 1) **Understand what is happening with your mind** – the unconscious process your mind goes through when it is put under pressure.
- 2) **Train your technical skills in the right way** - so that you build a Method that is capable of sustaining pressure.
- 3) **Undertake the right mental training** - so that you know how to keep your mind on the Task In Hand

There is some good and bad news regarding building mental resilience:

- **The bad news** - There is no magic bullet, it takes time - as with all sports learning to perform mentally under pressure is a skill... one that takes far longer to master than simply learning the correct driving technique.
- **Good news (1)** – Everyone suffers with lack of resilience, so you are not alone
- **Good news (2)** – Everyone, if trained correctly (and they are persistent) can learn to become resilient under extreme pressure.

Before we look at becoming resilient we need to know clearly what you must deliver under pressure - what is your optimal performance at any one time – in qualifying you are looking for your optimum performance – no more, no less.

- 1) **Your current skill level** – It is not essential that you have perfect technique just that you deliver all of that current skill, whatever that may be.
- 2) **Your current experience level** – When you step into your car to qualify your current experience is fixed – you can't know any more.

It is when pressure forces you to 'try' and do more than your current skill/experience that things start to go wrong – and you can easily slip into over/ under-driving - both of which have a significant negative impact on your performance.

When pressure comes on what response is activated in our mind and body? – The Fight or Flight (Freeze) Response:

The fight-or-flight response is an instinctive reaction that occurs in your body in the presence of danger – this can be either physical (fear for your life), or mental (worry/stress).

The term 'fight-or-flight' represents the choices that our ancient ancestors had to make when faced with danger, like suddenly being confronted by a Saber-toothed tiger. They could either fight or flee... or in the worst case 'freeze'. It is important to note that nowadays the response can be triggered due to real threats, imaginary threats or past memories of threats.

- **Real Threat** - Someone spinning in front of you.
- **Imaginary Threat** – Worrying about what could happen in a race – thoughts of crashing (physical) or performing badly (mental).
- **Past Memories of Threats** – Before qualifying worrying about your poor performance at the previous race weekend.

The response triggers the release of hormones that prepare your body to either stay or deal with a threat or to run away to safety. This is not something we have conscious control of and the following are examples of the changes that can take place:

- **Increase in heart rate and breathing** – This provides the body with the energy and oxygen needed to fuel a rapid response to danger
- **Trembling** - The muscles tense and become primed for action, which can cause trembling or shaking
- **Eyes** - Your pupils dilate to help you see better - your peripheral vision is also heightened
- **Brain** - Mental activity and alertness increase for quick decision making
- **Blood** - Your blood flow to muscles will increase to prepare for flight or fight

Pre-race nerves:

A lot of these responses will sound very familiar to us as 'pre-race nerves' or when you were younger they would be described as 'butterflies' in your stomach, examples of which could be going back to school, before a school match, before exams or simply just reading in class. We can experience both positive and negative butterflies:

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Positives 'butterflies':

As you can see from the body's reaction to the fight or flight response (above) there are many positive aspects that professional drivers can harness to make them better (this is where the great drivers separate themselves from the good drivers) – so when fight and flight is triggered:

- They feel alert and are excited to get the qualifying session or race started
- They feel physically primed for action
- They are more mentally alert and can focus clearly on the task in hand
- They feel ready to tackle any challenge that comes their way
- They will feel their heart beating harder, but they know it's natural and helpful

Negative 'butterflies' / Performance Anxiety – If you are struggling in qualifying this is probably what you are experiencing):

- You to become anxious about the race and you are nervous before you start
- You to feel physically sick to your stomach... and sometimes are literally sick
- You have excess internal mental chatter and you can't think clearly, calmly or logically
- You worry about what you might encounter during the race
- You feel physical symptoms such as an increased heart rate (heart pounding) and this makes you anxious and uptight

So what is our flight and fight response protecting? – Our Ego:

In the west we associate the 'ego' with being arrogant, proud, or selfish, whereas in eastern philosophy the 'ego' is seen as something that is part of everyone and is an aspect of your personality that has been built up since childhood as a way of navigating and protecting ourselves from our environment and the wider outside world. Ultimately it becomes a person's sense of self esteem and self importance, how you like to be seen by your peers and the wider world – an idealized version of yourself.

When your ego starts to overcompensate and become a challenge, you can start to demonstrate the following behaviours:

- You constantly compare yourself to the performance of others and you are fearful of not being quickest and how you will be seen.
- You can protect yourself with excuses.
- You can become judgmental and critical of others.
- You can demonstrate false confidence and false bravado.

So how does the ego affect your fight or flight and freeze instinct?

Fortunately in today's world, real dangers are few and far between – there are no lions and bears in the local park but that doesn't mean you've lost your ability to trigger the fight or flight response. Unfortunately in the absence of these threats it has been hijacked by our ego and it can now be triggered by non-life threatening situations such as when another driver is quicker than us or is catching us. Our ego tries to defend us in the same life and death way.

This life or death response is so powerful that you want an *immediate* way out and for racing drivers this could be:

- **Fight** – You immediately (in the next braking area) brake later and start to over-drive
- **Flight** – You don't want to confront the situation and start to make excuses or just plain give up
- **Freeze** – Tensing up and choking

Critically -The more frequently the fight-or-flight response is activated, the more likely it is to be activated again. Subsequently it will take less to activate it and the response will likely be more forceful.

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PERFORMING UNDER PRESSURE (2) – TRAINING YOUR ABILITY TO PERFORM UNDER PRESSURE

To become mentally resilient requires just three actions:

- 1) **You need to understand what is happening** (as covered above) – So that your mind does not go searching round for solutions.
- 2) **Build your Method** – So that you have a process that is locked in and can sustain pressure.
- 3) **Train you mental strength and resilience** – So that you can keep your mind on the Task In Hand.

1) Understand what is happening (this eases the pressure on you):

- **Know that you can't escape pressure** – It is the field you have chosen to play on – the human does not like choices that involve discomfort and we always look for quick ways to get out of trouble (fight or flight) – we always choose pleasure over pain.
- **Understand the mental process that is taking place** – Know that mental and physiological processes that take place when pressure starts to build and understand that it is perfectly natural... everyone suffers.
- **Understand where your performance is now (where are you on the developmental curve)** – Are you striving for more than your current skill/experience level can deliver – are you setting yourself up for failure and over/under driving?
- **Accept that you are not always going to be quickest** – You should always be striving to be but you are not always going to be fastest... the real skill is managing the days when you are not - Champions salvage a sixth in adversity rather than panic and over-drive and finish tenth
- **Know that the only variable is your ability to focus 100% on the Task In Hand** – Remember that when you are chasing another car you can go quicker because you have a target for our focus on (you don't suddenly become more talented).

2) Build your 'Method' – Your technical skills

In training your most important job is to focus 100% on building your Method, your technique. Your Method is of vital importance as this is what you take into battle – too many drivers start changing what they are doing under pressure.... your Method needs to be rock solid.

- **Assess your Strengths and Weaknesses** – You can't train effectively unless you know what to work on.
 - **Know your Strengths** - These need to be maintained or they will deteriorate
 - **Know your Weaknesses** – These need to be prioritised and worked on every day
- **Train effectively** – Training must be:
 - **Structured** – Constantly identifying and working on the big wins not the fun things to do.
 - **Disciplined** – Motivation has no place in your training – if you need motivation to train your goals are too weak
 - **Purposeful** - Working in a constant struggle, pushing limits and reaching for what is just outside of your grasp
 - **Never making excuses** – Never hiding from competition, never protecting yourself and never giving up.
 - **Intense and focused** – Train at the same level of intensity that you will be competing at.
 - **Run drills in your sim training that make you adaptable:**
 - Run specific qualifying drills
 - Change setup between runs
 - Change tyre grip between runs
 - Interrupt your training sessions to get used to yellow flags, traffic etc.
 - **Run Pressure Drills in your sim training** – At iZone drivers are always running Pressure Drills of one form or another so that pressure is the norm, not the exception.

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3) Train your mind to be mentally resilient

Building mental resilience is all about being able to cope with discomfort – pressure, especially pressure on our ego is extremely uncomfortable and human nature is to escape discomfort as quickly as possible:

- a) Imagine a situation when you have been driving really well in testing, when the driving is flowing - you will generally experience the following:
- You are not thinking about how to drive you are just driving
 - The process unfolds in front of you, corner by corner
 - You are not trying
 - It's easier and enjoyable
 - You are performing well
- b) You look in your mirrors and you see another car catching you (possibly your team mate!) – At this point you meet what we call the 'Crossroads Of Choice':

Choice 1 - You consciously choose to focus on the next corner and keep your focus on the Task In Hand... keeping your concentration 100% on executing your skill in each corner. You effectively choose to stay where you are and accept what is happening - Or you choose.....

Choice 2 – You immediately think of the consequence of being slow (your ego is triggered):

- My team mate will be happy
 - Everyone will know - it's on TSL
 - How will I explain this on Social media – I have told everyone how quick I am
 - What will friends and family think
 - How am I going to explain this
- a) These thoughts trigger your emotions which in turn trigger your fight or flight instinct and importantly:
- You will want to escape the feeling as quickly as possible:
 - At this point logic has no chance (emotion is 10x more powerful than logic)
- b) You now 'unconsciously' on autopilot':
- Start to 'think' how you can drive quicker
 - You look at ways to 'cheat' time – you want a quick way out - you start to over-drive:
 - Brake later
 - Carry more speed
 - Pick up the throttle early
 - You experience a drop in performance
 - It's not enjoyable and you get frustrated
 - You experience a further drop in performance

How could you have stopped this from happening?

It's quite simple, you have to remember where this all started... the *thought* that your team mate was catching you.

So, if you could have caught that thought and re-directed the mind to the Task In Hand... and keep it there none of this would have happened... fact!

So how do we keep the mind on the task in hand no matter what pressure we are under – by learning and practicing Mindfulness.

Mindfulness:

Mindfulness is a meditation technique that can trace its history back 2,500 years to the time of the Buddha and is very much in vogue in sports science at the moment... and in general life.

Mindfulness is not about avoiding negative thoughts or uncomfortable feelings or bodily sensations, the real goal is to develop the skills necessary to engage in present-moment attention (i.e. focussing on the task in hand) without judging these experiences as right or wrong or good or bad, and without trying to alter these experiences.

Instead of trying to avoid uncomfortable experiences (known as experiential avoidance), mindfulness encourages the acceptance of those experiences (known as experiential acceptance).

The more one practices mindfulness the less alert your Fight and Flight Instinct becomes and the less likely it is going to be triggered.