



INSIDE THE DRIVER'S MIND: SIMON FITCHETT

THE DRIVER'S STATE OF MIND IS AS IMPORTANT A COMPONENT OF THE RACE WEEKEND AS ANY ENGINE OR AERO SET-UP UNDERTAKEN IN THE GARAGE. SIMON FITCHETT, THE RENOWNED MIND PERFORMANCE COACH, EXPLAINS THE IMPORTANCE OF MENTAL PREPARATION FOR A DRIVER ON TODAY'S F1 GRID.

Formula One is rich with characters, not least the drivers themselves. Over the last seven years, I have been privileged to work with a few of those drivers, including four years with David Coulthard (DC) and a year each with Vitaly Petrov, Jerome D'Ambrosio and Sergio Perez. Personally, working with DC was a very special time as it's not easy to just click with someone and have that trust, respect and understanding so quickly, and with DC I had that. The compatibility of your personalities is important too; the driver's being vital to how they approach everything on their journey to achieving success. A personality that has attention to detail, respect, and a sense of humour and understanding will find success easier to come by.

MENTAL AND PHYSICAL PREPARATION

Then there is the physical and mental side of a driver's role. If both measured up against each other in terms of importance, then the mental side wins without a shadow of a doubt. Since I have qualified as a mental coach, my approach focuses significantly on the mental side, but you can only help someone mentally if they are willing to listen and work on that part of their performance. The physical part is by far the easiest, and all of the drivers will have a high level of physical fitness, but if they are not mentally prepared then this will affect their performance far more than not being physically fit. They also interlink because if you are not physically fit enough then this would, in turn, affect your mental strength on various levels, again affecting performance. Just look at (Fernando) Alonso this season; clearly not in the quickest car but he was still in the hunt at the last race of the season. His being in this position is not only down to the team, the car and the people around him, but also his mental strength and his ability to focus on the right things.

APPLICATION

There is no particular time when the work is at its most critical – all the work you do is crucial as it is all aimed at one thing; extracting the most out of both the driver and the car, beating their team mate and winning races. Pre-season is crucial in getting to the right level physically and preparing mentally for the long and intense season ahead. Testing is all about integrating with the team, building confidence throughout the

garage and getting to know the car and its systems. In between races, it's about limiting energy loss and maintaining fitness levels whilst getting adequate rest, and race weekends are all about optimising the potential and both themselves and the cars to qualify and finish the race in the best possible position they can. As their physical preparation should already be in place, the race weekend is much more about mental preparation for the drivers.

My involvement over a typical race weekend is quite intense. Until all sessions are over, it is non-stop. All the kit has to be ready with all fluids and food organised, after which comes the physical and mental preparation in the form of massage, stretching, relaxation, visualisation and activation so that everything is switched on physically, neurologically and mentally.

Hypnotherapy is something I will only use if asked. It is not something to push onto someone. It has to come from them and their desire to work on a specific issue that may be troubling them, which can be anything from confidence, breaking points, fear of a past incident or result at a track, managing stress, or it can be for simple relaxation and focus. Psychotherapy, again, is used if requested, but this can be executed through talking or through the way I question or suggest something. Never underestimate the power of suggestion.

IN THE ZONE

You will often hear the term being 'in the zone'. This zone does exist and believe it or not is a light state of hypnosis. We all go into states of hypnosis numerous times every day. Have you ever been driving down the motorway and suddenly thought you can't remember the last mile? Well, you have been in a state of hypnosis. It's about passing what we call the CCF (Conscious Critical Faculty), which is effectively switching off from what's going on around you even though your senses are more alert than in a normal state. This is the best state to be in for a driver when preparing to get in the car and once in it. The more your mind is focused on what you are doing and less on anything outside then you will better optimise your performance. ■