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Hope is NOT a Strategy

Derek Daly guides you through the practical application of driver development

It was minus one degree on race day in 1978 when I scored my first Formula One world championship point at the Canadian Grand Prix. A wiry little Canadian genius of car control called Gilles Villeneuve won that day. We were both raw rookies attempting to be successful in Formula One without the benefit of coaching (it didn't exist back then). During the following four years we both made all the mistakes possible in full view of the world. We both left Formula One in 1982 – me because mistakes cost me my contract and Gilles because a mistake cost him his life – what a time of profound learning.

Little did I know that those difficult years would provide the foundation of a racing education that led me having a driver development book, *Race to Win*, published in 2008 – and endorsed by one of my personal hero's, Mario Andretti.



A significant part of that education pointed out that hope is not a good strategy when it comes to motorsports. Motor racing is an expensive, complex and dangerous sport with potential huge rewards and even bigger pit falls. So it seems only logical to attempt to build a career in a somewhat controlled and organized manner, right? If that were to happen, what would be the powerful “learning moments” for a young driver along the way? If more is caught than taught, how does a young driver catch the lesson at an accelerated rate, and even more importantly, absorb the lesson and use it for his benefit.

To answer these questions I decided break down the genesis of driver development into an unprecedented program because quite frankly, the sport and particularly its participants, desperately needs it.



The Five Factors of Fast

To keep things as simple as possible I believe that there are Five Factors of Fast when developing a driver. These are wrapped around strategic and tactical decisions. Strategic decisions set the long-term target – tactical decisions allow you to take the steps that get you to that long-term target.

I recommend having just three significant primary strategic areas that a driver works on during any season and the three primary tactical areas at the race track.. The strategic long-term points will change form year to year as the driver develops and new weaknesses appear, but the three primary tactical areas will stay pretty much the same throughout a career.



The three primary strategic areas form the basis of the drivers season long plan. For example; a young driver might be the fastest driver on the track by himself, but he gets poor starts and therefore immediately takes himself out of a position to be successful. Getting better starts would be part of a season's strategic plan. Or a driver might make mistakes at critical times during races, working on the ability to eliminate these mistakes could be part of a seasons strategic plan. The three tactical points at the race track seldom change (see Stick to the Basics below) .

Fast Factor One: Developing Fast happens slowly

The absolute most important thing to understand about any athlete is that they all develop at their own pace. They do not necessarily do what you think they should be doing - they only do what they are able to do - and this ability is accelerated by someone providing powerful learning moments - either on or off the track. Teenagers can only process information at the rate that teenagers can process information. Therefore, I believe that development is predicated on an off track strategic





long term plan that is executed through tactical efforts both on and off the race track – and all this happens at the rate that the driver can absorb.

Fast Factor Two: Stick to the basics

No matter what track or what series, from karts to Formula One, just Stick to the Basics each time at the racetrack. The basics are; a) Identify your Reference Points, b) Read the Car, and c) Let the Car do the Work. These three basics create the very foundation of your race weekend and tactical plan.

* **Identify your Reference Points:** This needs to happen as soon as possible. These will be your braking, turn in or lines through corners etc. When these are set, it frees up mental capacity to feel the car.



* **Read the car:** The ultimate responsibility to provide a driver with a good car set up is the drivers. He/she must learn the discipline of understanding what is restricting the performance of the car. This is a learned trait and requires different support for different drivers.

* **Let the car do the work:** A racecar can only go as fast as a racecar can go, no matter who is behind the wheel. It is the driver's responsibility to provide the opportunity for the racecar do its work as close to the limit as possible for a long as possible during its time on the racetrack. When a driver starts to push the car beyond its limit, the car resists the inputs and fights back by either flying off the road or possibly using up its tires and therefore going slower than its potential maximum possible speed.

Fast Factor Three: Develop before you position:

One of the most important aspects of any driver's development is to make sure that you "develop" before you "position". Too many parents and/or advisors want the drivers to be in the next class up as soon as possible or to be the youngest



driver in a class. This can be a fatal flaw (and expensive) if the driver is not sufficiently developed to handle such a class of car or environment. When a driver gets into a new series. The ability to get “on top of the situation” is directly proportional to the amount he/she will learn and the speed at which that learning happens.

Fast Factor Four: Relationships create your sponsorships.

As a driver scours the countryside for sponsorship, almost 100% of early career support will come from your direct sphere of influence-friends and family. As you progress and the numbers get bigger, you move out of what family and friends abilities and into what a business might do. However, this second stage will only happen if you develop a relationship of trust and confidence with the sponsor target – and this can take years. If you want big support, start building big trust and confidence as soon as possible with your sponsor targets.



Fast Factor Five: Concentrate on the process not the result.

A driver should NEVER go to a racetrack thinking he has to drive particularly fast today to be successful. All a driver should be expected to do is to bring his/her A game – that is a drivers only responsibility. The more a driver concentrates on the end result (I want to win), the more he/she will practice the art of self-sabotage.

The driver hopes that the team brings their A game and that together they can be successful by simply doing things right. Going fast in a racecar is merely a bi-product of all of the people in the mix doing the right things right.

Remember, the mission is to take HOPE away from being the strategy.

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