

Moments of excellence in a speed sport - Interview with a formula one motor car racing driver.

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Abstract

This article presents an interview was conducted with a highly respected and successful formula one driver. It explores the drivers views about speed, risk, optimal regulation of movement, and mental links to excellence. Due to an agreement between interviewer and interviewee the name of the well known formula one driver is not mentioned.

Speed seems to an increasingly prevalent influence in many domains of our lives and most people link speed with feelings of stress. The perception of increased speed in the change and further development of society and especially in the competitive corporate world is often discussed. Social scientists and economists alike argue that this development is driven by an ongoing process of shortening the time windows in product and service development as well as in delivery cycles.

Competing forces in the global business world – considered good or bad, constantly increase. The demand for higher quality products in close to no time for delivery are fundamental cornerstones of business growth. And business growth is needed for

securing financial welfare. Decision makers face the challenge of keeping up with these developments. In the world of work, handling increased speed of development has become a fact of live. And there is no end to this speeded up development in sight. Effective coping strategies to respond accordingly to these increased demands are discussed in leader's circles around the globe.

This big picture about the world of work is why I invite you to zoom in and shift your attention onto a micro-world of Formula one racing, where speed and stress is a dominant performance related variable. By doing so I hope that you can pull out some lessons about how individuals can better function under other stressful high speed conditions.

The following interview with a very successful Formula one driver is interesting with regards to speed and stress. This highly experienced and successful formula one driver talks about his approach on how to excel in a sport where performing under stress while travelling at high speed is a top priority.

In this sport, elite performers continually take more risks to keep up with the best and progress beyond their present level of comfort. Key elements of performing successfully in motor car racing, at the very edge of possibilities include; mental planning, and being able to regulate and control focus and movement in an optimal way. The mental strategies that these individuals master seem to become critical not only in regard to keeping their performance at a very high level but ultimately as a key factor for their health and survival.

The following interview will help to shed light on the planning, regulation, and controlling of optimal movement used by elite formula one car drivers. Perhaps the moments of excellence discussed are not only of value for people involved in sport but as well for individuals in many arenas where speed is considered to cause stress.

The interviewee elaborates on some of the specific elements of “Peak Moments in Sport” that are reported broadly in Sport Psychology literature by numerous authors namely;

- 1) High level of joy and fulfilment.
- 2) Feeling of unity, connection & fusion with environment.
- 3) Altered perception of time; active transformation of time and slow-motion.
- 4) Reduced ego and harmony.
- 5) Total absorption.

6) High level of performance.

The interviewee considers the active achievement of these feelings in situations where it counts, to be an important and permanent goal in his pursuit for ongoing excellence in his discipline.

Furthermore the interviewee also believes that good physical fitness and optimal nutrition are prerequisite for the optimal mental functioning of the brain.

The special added value of this interview is that an experienced expert talks about the process of reaching and regularly experiencing top performances. Enjoy these unparalleled practical insights emerging from a speed sport!

Gustav: What is your view or impression of speed in your sport?

F1 driver: The most important thing about speed in my sport is, we probably go three hundred and forty kilometers per hour. You have to try to make it one hundred and fifty kilometers. You have to try to slow everything down as much as you can. If you slow it down in your mind, you have more time to do what you have to do. That’s very important. And I think that is how the good drivers come to the formula one. Because they are able to slow it down.

Gustav: What is your definition of speed?

F1 driver: It’s not three hundred and forty five kilometers per hour. It is the speed of the best possible time for a lap. Because you get a time, the quickest time you can which means to be as quick around every corner, down the straightaway, everywhere. And it is not just to be fast in the fast sections. It is trying to make it the maximum in every situation, breaking, and acceleration, every-

thing in one lap. Trying to do everything in one lap, and doing the same thing over and over.

Gustav: Do you remember how and why you got involved in your particular sport?

F1 driver: I was five or six. My uncle used to run a go-cart track. I used to just drive the go-carts. Basically, I went from there. These go-carts, they were very, very slow, if you compare them to a racing car. But if you compare it to something different, they weren't. It was something that I enjoyed very much. And that was the main thing, because I enjoyed it so much.

Gustav: How did you become effective at handling speed?

F1 driver: I think that was a progression, because you ... go through different cars. You probably do ... one hundred and fifty kilometers, and then you go into a formula ford, which is the next car in motor sport. Then you probably do around one hundred and eighty kilometers and then you go to the next step. Then it is just a gradual build up of speed, when you've got more speed; you also have more grip. So actually, the speed in the corner is much higher; you have a higher speed in the corner.

Gustav: Could you help me feel what you experience in a lap? What is the feeling?

F1 driver: If I compare the feeling to the St. Moritz bobsled run, it's not so much the corner. The earlier corners are similar, but when you come to the fast ones, when the pressure is that way (vertical) and we have another direction (horizontal). The feeling, even the bouncing and jumping around, that is probably similar, but when you get to the higher speeds, it will happen much, much quicker. It is similar to what you experience

in a bob race. The feeling of side turn, that is very difficult ... It is the impression of pressure, you've got ... even a road car doesn't give you that impression, because they are much softer

Gustav: Could you now focus on a situation of very high speed - like in Hockenheim, Germany - where you reach the very edge of what is possible with these cars? Can you share a situation where you felt comfortable and really confident, and one of the best situations that you had at very high speeds and describe it?

F1 driver: Yeah, I can only describe being at the limit and that normally is when we are breaking and changing gears. We are trying to stay on the right line into the corner where the car is feeling loose ... It is a little bit like a road car on ice, when it really starts to spin. It is just that beginning and it is just that looseness that you get. When you get to that stage, you are basically at the limit of the speed of your car. You are facing the limit of the road, of the car and as soon as you get that ... and then the corner itself. But then it is the next one, it is trying to be at the ultimate power without spinning the wheels too much at the exit when you get the most acceleration out of the car. The feeling at the edge is more like driving on ice, driving on ice at the very beginning is almost similar. Then you try to get to the edge and then you go way over the edge and then you spin and slip off the track.

Gustav: Can you describe the edge? What it is and what do you feel at the edge?

F1 driver: The edge is basically spinning a car. And you go one percent more and you are spinning off the track. Just one percent below, not one percent above. To get to that, it takes a lot of concentration ... and it is

very important and you get a heavy edge ... concentration is very, very high.

Gustav: What do you focus on when you are in such a high-speed situation?

F1 driver: Again, I think it is just a feeling ... at the end of the day. Because concentration is not on the speed. Breaking consequently at the same points ... at the quickest points that you have probably practiced and you have got to know where the limit is, because you have sort of practiced to try to break a little bit later or earlier or to get over the edge. You find the ideal or most comfortable place and the quickest place for the car in every corner and it is really just a feeling once you've done it probably a couple of times. It is more of a natural thing to get that feeling instead of concentration: it is here (points to his stomach). It is more like it becomes automatic. At the beginning it is probably a visual point because you have to define the place where you are, but once you get comfortable at the place it is more a feeling. And you probably actually do it visually. You look at the corner and you know the distance, the visual distance.

Gustav: How do you feel in these situations when you are under such conditions? What do you feel in your body?

F1 driver: Yeah, I'm very relaxed, my body is quite relaxed and I think my heart rate is not too high on the racetrack. My heart rate is not very high anyway. And I am feeling very relaxed with what I am doing. I am not someone that is very stressed, very tight. I am very loose, the body is very loose. It is just concentrating on what is around me. It's not so much what's in front of me, because you are trying to be at the next corner ahead. Again, I think this is probably where that thing comes naturally where you brake.

Gustav: You talked about a relaxed state. What is the energy level you are in? Can you describe it?

F1 driver: Oh no, please. If I talk about my relaxed state, it is not relaxed like sitting in front of a TV, for sure. It is more ... I don't know how to explain.

Gustav: Do you have an example?

F1 driver: Again, well, the energy level is very high, because you have to use all your strength, just to turn the steering wheel. It tenses the muscles somewhere because when you push the brake, the pressure is at eight hundred pounds and that is pushing only with one foot. The pressure is very high through the one leg. I am sure that goes all the way up the back and everywhere else, but you don't feel that, you don't feel as if you are pushing eight hundred pounds. You feel very, light, very easy. And I think that is where the whole body is in harmony, just sort of all together. Not where your mind is working with the eye and then the foot. It all works together, it is a very smooth feeling.

Gustav: And what do you perceive from the outside? What do you see, what do you focus on?

F1 driver: It is more like focusing on feeling. I mean you see everything, but it is more like taking it in. It is almost like an image that you have of the circuit the whole way around and that image sticks to your mind. You know exactly where you are. Yes, you can see everything if you want to look. You can see everything and sometimes down a straightaway, as in Hockenheim, you can look because it is so long, and you have time. But when it comes to the point where it is probably five hundred feet before the corner, then in some way you are back ...

Gustav: If you think of a qualifying round where you have to really concentrate, where is your focus then? What do you perceive then?

F1 driver: It is more in a group of people when your concentration has to go up. When you look in your mirror and you know someone is behind you and even when you are not looking in your mirrors, you know they are behind you, you can feel them. They are there and everything is focused in front and you are trying to fix yourself compared to what they are doing. Because if you concentrate on the guy behind you, your thinking goes away. So you try to keep the people in front, not the guys behind.

Gustav: So it is more secure behind you?

F1 driver: Yeah, in some ways. You use that security from behind, if you can. You have to concentrate on what he is doing and try to put enough pressure on him, so he might make a mistake. That is fixing your mind on what he is doing in front.

Gustav: You talked about a feeling, feeling the guy behind you. Could you explain this a little bit more?

F1 driver: It is just a feeling of what is around you. Sometimes you see him in the mirror, but sometimes you don't. Even if you don't see him in the mirrors, you know he is there. You have that sort of feeling and you are aware that they are just behind you. And when you are aware that they are behind you then you concentrate more on what's upfront, because if you are looking on the guy in front, you probably won't make as many mistakes. If you concentrate on the guy behind you, you make more mistakes, you try to hold him back. You know that guy is there. You just know what is around.

Gustav: Can we talk about limits? I mean about the speed, the car. What limits you from becoming faster?

F1 driver: I think the guy who can slow down the speed of the car in his mind is much better off for driving the fastest. If you can slow it down, you actually have more time to do the particular job.

Gustav: You talk about slowing it down. How do you see that? What is the feeling?

F1 driver: The feeling is an accurate feeling. If someone goes down the highway at two hundred kilometers an hour and then they slow down to sixty, it looks like you are stopped. In formula 1, it is the same. When you do it in the morning, you do sixty and you go to one hundred, you say: Oh it is going quicker. And when you get a much quicker speed and then you come back it is much easier to take everything in around, because your mind is going quicker, your brain is going quicker, because the speed is quicker. When you now go slower and your brain is still going two hundred, everything looks slower; you have much more time.

Gustav: What is it that makes it slow down?

F1 driver: It is the brain. The brain tries to speed up to the speed you are going. When you go five hundred miles an hour and then you break to two hundred miles an hour. Two hundred is normally fast but the brain has adapted to the five hundred, so the two hundred seem like nothing. We have to do it the same way, *but without going up and then back*. We have to do it the same way. I think that is where the good guys are probably different. They can do it.

Gustav: Do you train this?

F1 driver: I would not say train. It is just a matter of concentration. It comes with practice. The more you do it, the better you get at it. I think you have to drive to do it. To do it outside is not so easy. You can't really do it. There are some games such as computer games, that are quite quick, but it is not really the same. It is easy in the end, but it is difficult at the beginning. But the effect is not the same. When it is easy at the end it appears slow. The brain and the fast part of the track have adapted and it seems easy. The brain goes with it.

Gustav: You talked about speed and concentration. You talked about a certain challenge and that you liked it. What brings about this feeling of satisfaction in speed?

F1 driver: I think it is the challenge. It is the hard focus and driving at the limit. Speed is one thing but getting a challenge is also important, nearly the same. When I was sitting in the go-cart, I said I wanted to become a formula 1 driver. But even at that early age, I probably knew what I enjoyed and what I wanted to do. I want to work to that and try to get there, and when you get there, you still have to go higher and higher.

Gustav: Let's talk about perception of time in speed situations. What is time then?

F1 driver: Nothing. Time is nothing. Especially in a race that takes about one to two hours. You are just not aware of how time passes. It goes much quicker, normally. It goes much, much quicker. One reason is probably that you enjoy it and the other side is that your concentration is so high, that you are unaware of the time around you. You don't really focus on time at all.

Gustav: How would you define time as a car racer?

F1 driver: As a car racer, time is only speed. Or for one lap the fastest time.

Gustav: Could we talk about risk or perception of risk in your particular sport? What do you think about security and risk in high-speed situations?

F1 driver: I think risk is just a fact of life. Risk is always present when we talk about life. You can play darts, and you can be shot down by a dart, or get run down by a car in traffic. And in motorcar racing, it is the same thing. It is not only formula one. It is tobogganing; skiing, motor biking ... the risk is probably outside. There is risk in anything you do. Going on holiday, going shopping, driving a car, isn't there? In anything you do. But in my sport, risk is high and I know that. I am willing to take that risk. I know what could happen to me, I could be killed or badly injured. But I am willing to take that risk. I am not thinking about risk when I am going around a track or walking down the street, or if I am going to hurt myself. You just do not think about it. Because you accepted it and that is it.

Gustav: And that is your mental strategy concerning risk?

F1 driver: I mean if I would think about hurting myself, I would make mistakes. It is not an issue, *you have accepted it*. Thinking about getting hurt is dangerous you lose the necessary concentration. If you are thinking of being hurt when you are driving, you have a serious problem. Thinking about it is probably worse.

Can we talk about your mental preparation before, during and after a race? What do you do and what do you need?

F1 driver: Just before a race. I get up in the morning and have breakfast at eight and get

to the track by nine. At nine-thirty you are in the box. Ten is the warm up, for just half an hour. Then it is team meeting in the car, just half an hour. Then we have another talk, have a driver meeting, and then we have the parade of the drivers. When the parade is finished, you probably come back in the car and discuss. You may be tired or whatever. And then you have about an hour, I guess. Then you have time to prepare. I take the fluid and I am trying to listen to some soothing music like Enigma It is music that I like ...it is so soothing. I go away from everything. It's just relaxing. In the preparation, you don't think of the start, the race. You don't plan to do this and this and pass there or there, because it is not possible to plan anyway. It doesn't work. The preparation is just to be as relaxed as I can. My stomach is feeling good. That makes me sure to have the right feeling I need for the race and that takes everything else away from me. You can't plan.

Gustav: And two minutes before the start?

F1 driver: Well, one of the highest times in the race is the start, when everyone is standing in the line one after the other. And then the lights come on and it is just a very high focus on these lights. That is where the highest stress is in the race, because it is also very early. You want a good race, and when it is going, it is almost calming to get into that rhythm.

Gustav: What is the concentration like during these one and a half hours in the race and how do you keep it? Is it easy?

F1 driver: Yeah it is easy. If you take the right food and the right fluid, then the concentration stays high, and it is not a problem. If you do not have the right food or fluid, you lose all your concentration. You stop inside.

Gustav: Do you focus on nutrition a lot?

F1 driver: Yeah, to get the body in the right condition for the race. Because if the body is not fit, it is not good, it is a bad thing. If you eat chocolate, it may be good for one lap, then you are completely finished, wasted. A lot of sports people do that in formula 1. I know that from other formulas. Again it is very important to prepare the body. The body needs a lot.

Gustav: Could you tell me about the best and the worst situation in training or in a race? In your career or in one race, or two different races where you were very satisfied with what happened and one situation where you were dissatisfied.

F1 driver: I was very satisfied with my performance in Hungary last year when we finished third. It was very satisfying because for me it was a top race. It was very hot, certainly the track was difficult, you can't relax and in formula one you have to drive one hundred percent. I think I drove a hundred and twenty in that race the whole way through, the concentration was always very high. When the race was finished, I had the good result. I had races similar to that, and halfway similar to that. The car in those situations was probably not third, it was about seventh. I was so happy with the performance because I had the ultimate performance that day in that car in that race. You don't necessarily have to win just to make it satisfying. And when you have a bad day and you make a mistake. If you think about why you made the mistake, the next one comes and so on and you do it every time. I learned very early about that. Whenever I did that, the best thing was to get out of the car, relax for five minutes, not think about anything, get back in and then usually it was fine. But when you are in a race, it is obviously not practical, you cannot

get out. After the race, you evaluate how this could happen. You try to analyze what and why you did. Sometimes you find things, but most of the time not that much. The only thing that I found is that you have to be relaxed. If I am relaxed I am usually a little bit more focused than most other drivers. That is important for me.

Gustav: What is your style of analyzing?

F1 driver: What I did in case of a bad day was I compared it to what I did on a good day. I try and see what the difference was. And you might find, on a good day I relaxed for an hour and then I got in the car, I had the right food. On the bad day, maybe I relaxed only ten minutes and had bad food. So you try to go back to the other one. You do what you felt successful with. You use that all the time.

Gustav: Are there things that I did not mention so far that have to do with speed or are important for speed in your sport?

F1 driver: Speed, I say speed is not the important thing, the ultimate, maximum speed. The speed for one lap, this means to break, the changing of the gears, the power, it is more trying to get in harmony with the car, trying to be one with the car. It's the car and me as one. If there are two it gets worse.

Gustav: So it is your job to be in harmony with the car to get that feeling?

F1 driver: Yeah, that is your task. It is mostly or almost as if you are floating in the car and when the car moves you are moving with the car. The best feeling you have is to be part of the car.

Gustav: That was very interesting. Thank you very much for your time and your openness. I am sure that some of your insights will help others to get closer to their personal best.