



**Ten pages that every team manager should read**

## **Chapter 2**

# **Talent Identification**

*Were you born with a predominately instinct-reflex talent, is it a feel-sensitive talent, or is it a combination of both?*

After years of seminars resulting from the interest in the original *Race to Win*, this chapter drew more comment from drivers and families when they fully understood its power. This is the Derek Daly Academy's holy grail. This is our anchor in the ground as DDA pioneered the understanding drivers could have different types of talent. Most people had never considered there could be two types of talent a driver can be born with. Neither one or the other is right or wrong, but they each need different types of support during the development stages. Again I will reiterate, talent identification is the very foundation of accurate driver development, because it provides the path and direction to ensure you are providing your driver with the right type of support. Make sure you are doing the right things as opposed to doing things right.

In 1997–98, when CART team owner Barry Green from Team Green asked us at Derek Daly Performance Driving Academy in Las Vegas to create an American driver development program on behalf of tobacco giant Brown & Williamson, we had the opportunity to work with 46 of the most talented young drivers in the U.S. over a three-year period.



Racing drivers' styles are just like their personalities and looks, completely different in almost every way. It was a fascinating exercise that quickly exposed both the strengths and weaknesses of each driver. Each driver had to come by himself without any moral support from family or friends. Within hours each driver's profile started to emerge, and with the types of exercises they were challenged, they could not hide anything from us.

As the program progressed, some drivers were intimidated, some used the "book of excuses," yet some welcomed the opportunity and relished the competition. Some drivers went fast immediately and some took their time to get comfortable. Some drivers coped with adversity well and some got flustered. To do the same lap times, some got there aggressively using more tires, brakes and fuel, while some got the lap times with ease and finesse. It was fascinating to see the different styles and approaches unfold in front of us.

After three days' initial evaluation, we pretty much knew the strengths and weaknesses of the drivers with real potential. We also realized for each of the drivers to progress up the ladder to stardom, they would need individually tailored programs to suit their particular profile, just like a football player, skier, swimmer, or any elite world-class athlete.

Racing drivers by their very nature are an ego-driven group who are almost scared to think someone would know that they have a weakness. This is their first big mistake that could derail a career. Truth and honesty in the early stages can create an unshakable foundation for a young driver. Just like the stopwatch never lies, the truth is the only thing that never changes.

The most important thing to remember is just about every young driver I have worked with has a profile of strengths and weaknesses. Recognizing and developing the



weaknesses is the key to building what we now know as the Champion's Pyramid. If we take it that every driver has God-given talent, one might assume the strengths and weaknesses could be technical, communication (people skills), emotional, or mental areas. However, as we delve into what type of God-given talent a driver might have, you begin to expose the foundation that must be clearly understood first.

I believe all potential great racing drivers are born with an inherent ability to understand the dynamics of a vehicle at high speed. They have an ability to feel through their backside what a car will do before it does it, which is vital at a place such as Indianapolis. They have a message delivery system from the butt cheeks to the brain that is permanently connected. They just *know* that when a car slides, you steer into the slide to regain control. You can't teach this instinctive reaction. It's just like when something is about to hit you. Your natural instinct causes you to put your hands up to protect yourself. This is instinctive, nobody taught you this.

The next question is what type of driving talent were you born with? Is it predominantly *instinct-reflex* talent, is it *feel-sensitive* talent or is it a combination of both. *Instinct-reflex* talent is a driver who can drive the wheels off anything he gets into. Whatever speed the car can go, he will make it go that speed. This would be a Lewis Hamilton, Tony Kanaan, Juan Montoya, A.J. Almendinger, or a Kimi Raikkonen. These drivers are not known for strong technical feedback. These are gifted drivers who are well liked in a team because you know every time they get in the car, the speed they extract is all the speed the car has. The down side is that the team must know how to set up the car to get its maximum speed. The driver is too busy driving hard and fast to feel what the car is doing, and therefore the driver does not lead the team technically.



The *feel-sensitive* type of talent is a driver who can feel what the car does and can engineer the car to go faster. This would be an Al Unser, Bobby Unser, Gil DeFerran, Alex Zanardi, or Jeff Gordon. These drivers can take bad cars and accurately identify the right changes necessary to engineer the car to go faster.

## **Instinct-Reflex Driver**

So let's delve deeper into the driver. These *instinct-reflex* drivers have nerve endings that are on fire and every fiber of their bodies are fully charged and ready to be unleashed as soon as they put a helmet on. Early in their careers an *instinct-reflex* driver becomes popular because he is usually a no-nonsense driver that just gets the job done. He is uncluttered with few distractions and only thinks about going fast. Engineering the car to go faster is not a high priority for him, because that is not in his character, and often they feel invincible. In the lower formulae they can get away with this because there is not a very complicated setup needed to be fast. Races tend to be short, tires tend to be spec, and therefore a flat-out sprint type of driver can be desirable. As long as a team can provide him with a good setup, he will happily do the rest.

Mika Hakkinen was fortunate to be a McLaren driver in a high-tech era where engineers and computers could provide him with the setup for him to use his *instinct-reflex* style. Because the late '70s or early '80s required a lot more accurate technical feedback from the driver, I don't believe Hakkinen would have been as successful then.

Many think one of Jean Alesi's biggest mistakes in his career was moving to Ferrari when he could have gone to Williams. Ferrari lured him through the emotional appeal, but they did not provide him with the cars good enough to take advantage of his phenomenal



*instinct-reflex* style. Some think Williams could have provided him with a better car at that time in his career. What Alesi needed to become a champion at that time was a team that could provide him with a good car with minimal technical setup input from the driver. In this type of environment, I believe Alesi would have been more successful.

The *instinct-reflex* driver can also frustrate a team, because no matter how hard he drives, he might be just a little off the pace, because he never thinks hard enough about the car setup, and relies too much on other people to control his destiny, and, again in the lower formulae, it is easier to get away with it. Many go-kart drivers are *instinct-reflex* drivers because they are surrounded by tuners who set-up their karts for them. This act, although well meaning by parents who write the checks to pay the tuners, can very often sabotage the future and long-term development of the driver because they fail to develop the discipline of making themselves think about what the car (or kart) is doing when they are in their formative learning years.

## **Feel-Sensitive Driver**

The drivers who are born with the *feel-sensitive* natural talent can travel a similar path in their formative years, but tend to have a bit more control of their destiny because they have the ability to guide the team technically. For the *feel-sensitive* driver it's always a fine line between trying to get the perfect setup and just going out and doing it. The technical driver has to walk the fine line between knowing what he needs in the car, but being fully prepared to give his all even if the car is not perfect. The *feel-sensitive* driver could also frustrate a team because he might not give his all if the car does not feel just right. Dario Franchitti and Jensen Button have a reputation for being like this. However, when the car is right, look out, because then they are a quick as anyone.



For the overall success of a team, it is vital for a driver and team owner/manager to understand exactly what type of talent he has and what part of the team needs to be supplemented to get the best from the driver. The real magic for a team manager is to understand this principle and have one of each in the team. The *feel-sensitive* driver is relied upon to find the best setup for the car and the *instinct-reflex* driver drives the wheels off it. This in turn pushes the *feel-sensitive* driver to push himself to his personal limits. Two top-line drivers pushing themselves and the car to the limits of possibility is usually a recipe for success within a team.

The team has to be properly set up, however, to take full advantage of such conditions. For example, one lead engineer might be enough for Indy 500 winner Gil DeFerran, or two-time world champion Fernando Alonso or four-time Champ Car champion Sebastian Bourdais because they are good at sorting out the right technical setup of the race car. Two-time Formula 1 world champion Mika Hakkinen or Grand Prix winner Jean Alesi and certainly Juan Montoya however might need two or three engineers to make up for their lack of ability to provide accurate technical feedback.

A great example of a team who had the right combination of drivers at one time was Andretti-Green Indy Car team with Dario Franchitti, Bryan Herta, Tony Kanaan, and Dan Wheldon. Dario and Bryan were the two *feel-sensitive* drivers while Tony and Dan were the *instinct-reflex* drivers. With this combination the team was dominant.

Dario left for the Ganassi team and then Bryan retired to be replaced by Danica Patrick and Hideki Mutoh. With this combination of drivers it's a good argument to say the vital *feel-sensitive* driver was gone and therefore the setup information was not as strong, and over time the team lost its way technically.



## The Magical Combination and Power of Both

This is where the great complete champions come from. The champions are those who have sustainable power. The champions who have long careers at the very top of their profession. This list of drivers tends to be a little shorter. At the top of this list is Michael Schumacher. The unwashed might say Michael won so many races because he had the best car. That is absolutely right, but how do you think he got the best car? Because he is one of the most technically accurate drivers ever in Formula 1 and the most ruthless and focused driver on the track.

All through his lengthy career (except maybe after his return from retirement), no matter what the technical regulations were changed to, Michael could consistently lead a team in the right direction while developing the car. Poor technical feedback always resulted in longer car development times for some race teams.

Former Formula 1 world champion Damon Hill also had good technical feedback, and he ended up with a championship-winning Williams at his disposal. I believe his Formula 1 career ended abruptly because Frank Williams did not fully understand his contribution on the technical side, and he believed a potentially faster driver would be more beneficial to the team. When Damon Hill left, so did a strong influence in the technical direction of the team. History shows Williams did not have a really fast car since until 2012 when the accurate input of Rubens Barrichello paid dividends.

Drivers can develop the magical combination of both *feel-sensitive* and *instinct-reflex*. This is when you have the ability to engineer a car to go faster, but when the chips are down, and the conditions are perhaps not favorable with the car just not to your liking,





you are still able to drive it as fast as it can go despite the problems. This might be a Michael Schumacher, Fernando Alonso, Sebastian Vettel, Will Power, Mario and Michael Andretti, Alain Prost, Jackie Stewart, Sebastian Bourdais, and Jimmy Johnson. Notice that these names are all multiple champions.

## **Discipline or lack thereof**

Now let's deal with the driver who has other tendencies. What about the driver who has good technical feel in the race car, but does not have the discipline to concentrate on the setup work because all he wants to do is go fast? I know this type of driver very well, because I was like this. I didn't know it at the time, but, on reflection, it is now very obvious to me.

At the British Grand Prix, on the weekend of my Formula 1 debut, my team owner and engineer was Mo Nunn, of Zanardi, Fittipaldi, Andretti, and Montoya fame (he was their engineer). I drove the Ensign MN01, which was a very efficient F1 car that gave good feedback. After Friday's qualifying, I was in the top 15, and because of this Goodyear rewarded us by allowing us to have a new-construction front tire for the final qualifying on Saturday. This would obviously help us stiffen up the front of the car and hence give us better traction. During the final one-hour session, with me trying to qualify for a Grand Prix for the first time, I did my first run on the control tires in preparation for the new tires made with latest and greatest construction. My first run put me 12th on the grid and a ripple of excitement ran all through our small team, because the Ensign had not been to that end of the grid for a very long time.





The new-development front tires were than fitted and out I went. Sure enough they felt a lot stiffer and better and consequently I had oversteer. Mo was convinced stiffening the roll bar would balance the car to allow me to take full advantage of the tires' benefits. I was too impatient, would not listen, and insisted on running the old tires I was familiar with. I eventually qualified 15th and made my Grand Prix debut in front of my home crowd starting beside world champion James Hunt. I was a hero on the day, but to this day I often what would have happened if I'd had enough discipline to not be driven by the stopwatch and instead be driven by the car setup. If the car is set-up right, the fast lap times just come. I now believe in my heart if I had been disciplined enough to listen to Mo instead of being driven by the stopwatch, my great grid position could have been even better, which might have prompted Goodyear to give us the better tires at the next race, and the rest of the season might have had a better foundation.

On the other side of this story, one of the most disciplined drivers I have ever seen is Al Unser Jr. He would always concentrate on the ultimate race setup and was always able to resist the temptation to just go fast. Al's discipline, however, often led to him starting deep in the field, but in his heyday on race day he was mighty. At the height of his career, Al Unser Jr. won the Long Beach Grand Prix five times in a row.

Then there is the driver who spends too much time focused on the competition rather than on himself and his personal performance. After they run, the first question you hear from them is, "How fast was the opposition?" When he should be concentrating deeply on his own performance, he is instead distracted by the performance of another. Remember, only expend energies on what you can control, which is your own performance. Forget the rest of the competition, because you can not control them. Your performance is the only part of the equation you can control, and that is the only thing that will affect the



final outcome on race weekend. Not focusing on your personal performance can be a major flaw that can be corrected.

So what type of talent do you think you have? Do you see yourself in any of these examples? Do you see your friends or competition in any of these examples? Can you see and understand the driving styles of NASCAR, Formula 1 or Indy Car drivers? Can you see where some flourished in certain environments while others floundered? When you closely examine just what type of talent you were blessed with, and if you are very honest with yourself, you can turn any weakness into a strength, but you must understand how to surround yourself with the right environment. If you do this you can create a foundation for yourself that will stand tall for the rest of your career. Building that platform is a slow process, but you will have a better chance of a good payback if the foundation blocks are solid.

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