

From the moment a racing driver arrives in the paddock to the instant the lights go out on the grid, countless elements shape their performance. Fans often hear about “mental tricks” like visualization or “just breathe” advice promised as silver bullets—but seasoned instructors and drivers themselves lean heavily on something else: routines.

Why is that? Why do professional racing drivers favour established, repeatable routines rather than nebulous mental hacks? In this post, we’ll dive into the psychology and neuroscience underpinning high-level motorsport performance, referencing official GOV.UK guidance on performance management and taking a pragmatic look at how routines help optimise focus, reduce anticipatory worry, and manage working memory — the mental workspace critical to quick reactions and decision-making.

The Inverted-U Arousal Curve: Finding Your Performance Band

Understanding the relationship between arousal and performance is key. The *Inverted-U arousal curve*, a staple from sports psychology, illustrates how a driver’s physiological and psychological activation affects their ability to perform complex tasks.

Put simply:

- **Low arousal:** Understimulation leads to sluggishness, lack of focus, and poor reaction times.
- **Moderate arousal:** The “sweet spot” — heightened alertness, sharp attention, and optimal performance.
- **Too high arousal:** Anxiety, jitteriness, and overthinking cause mistakes and impaired judgement.

Each individual has a somewhat different “performance band” along this curve where they perform best. The job of a routine is to nudge the driver’s state into and hold it within this peak range, so they avoid the valleys of under- or over-arousal.

Why Mental Tricks Rarely Manage the Curve Precisely

Unstructured mental tricks—like telling oneself “stay calm” or “imagine victory”—are vulnerable to several flaws:

- **Lack of specificity:** Vague mental reminders rely on interpretation and can increase anticipatory worry if the brain fixates on desired outcomes instead of controllable processes.
- **Unreliable physiological impact:** Some “just breathe” guidance doesn’t specify breathing patterns, missing the chance to produce a quick, measurable shift in heart rate or muscle tension.
- **High cognitive load:** Attempting to perform mental tricks can ironically consume working memory—our short-term mental workspace vital for processing race variables and quick decisions.

Professional routines are a low-barrier solution to these issues. They come pre-associated with calm, control, and focus, allowing drivers to automate the mental transitions needed without overloading the mind.

Pre-Session Routines as Working Memory Management

Working memory—the brain’s mental scratchpad—is limited in capacity and vulnerable to interference. In a high-pressure environment like racing, working memory can be hijacked by **anticipatory worry** about potential failures, penalties, or outcomes.

A well-honed routine functions as a cognitive anchor. By running through the same sequence of actions—checking gear, adjusting seat belts, reviewing key points on the track layout—the driver occupies working memory

with familiar, low-stakes information.

This leaves less room for intrusive negative thoughts and primes the brain to shift focus externally. In other words, rather than battling internal distractions, the driver draws attention toward process cues and environmental associations. This form of **external, process-focused attention** has been shown to support automaticity and faster reaction times.

Creating Associations: Why Routines Stick

Associations are psychological links formed between certain triggers (e.g., the feel of the steering wheel, a specific sequence of movements) and mental states (calm, alertness, confidence). Strong association offers three advantages:

1. **Low cognitive barrier:** Because the routine is familiar, it requires minimal conscious effort, freeing cognitive resources for racecraft.
2. **Reliability:** The same routine reliably produces the same mental state across sessions and conditions.
3. **Resilience:** When stress threatens to spiral, the routine provides a predictable anchor point to recover focus.

Contrast this with mental tricks that ask drivers to summon feelings or imagine results on demand—something that often demands more mental effort and can backfire under pressure.

Extended-Exhale Breathing for Quick Physiological Shifts

Many drivers include a specific breathing pattern in their routine, often one involving a deliberate *extended exhale*. This technique leverages the physiology of the autonomic nervous system.

The extended exhale stimulates the parasympathetic nervous system—the body's "rest and digest" branch—reducing heart rate and muscle tension rapidly within seconds. This physiological pivot can move the driver away from an overly aroused, anxious state closer to the optimal mid-zone on the Inverted-U curve.

Why is this better than generic "breathe deeply" advice?

- It's immediate and measurable: the effect is noticeable within just 10-15 seconds.
- It's simple and repeatable, fitting seamlessly into a routine without extra mental clutter.
- Being externally focused on counting or timing the exhale distracts from anxious internal dialogues.

Hence, in a sport where every millisecond counts, this specific breathing strategy is a practical choice—no miracle claims, just biology.

External Process-Focused Attention vs Outcome Focus

One of the key performance differences for elite drivers compared to amateurs is their ability to maintain **external, process-focused attention**. Whereas beginners and "mental trick" seekers often fall into the trap of outcome obsession—focusing on lap times, victory, or error avoidance—experienced racers zero in on tangible process cues:

- Feel of the tyres through the steering wheel
- Visual markers on the track
- Engine note changes
- Body positioning

This focus connects to the low cognitive load provided by a routine. By automating preparatory behaviours and physiological regulation, drivers can trust their embodied knowledge and react fluidly to changing conditions.

How This Fits with GOV.UK Mental Wellbeing Guidance

GOV.UK's authoritative guidance on mental health and work emphasises simple, evidence-based steps to manage performance pressure, such as focused breathing and structured routines, rather than unproven “quick fixes.”

Racing drivers' reliance on routines aligns with these principles by:

- Keeping strategies low barrier and easy to access under pressure
- Promoting process engagement rather than outcome rumination
- Using physiological tools grounded in science rather than buzzwords

Summary Table: Routines vs Mental Tricks for Racing Drivers

Aspect	Routines	Mental Tricks
Working Memory Load	Low; draws on familiar sequences	Often high; requires conscious effort or imagery
Physiological Impact	Direct (e.g., extended-exhale breathing triggers parasympathetic response)	Indirect; often vague "just breathe" without specific effect
Focus Type	External, process-focused	Often internally outcome-focused
Cognitive Barrier to Use	Low; routine is automatic and ingrained	Varies; can be high or inconsistent
Effect Reliability Under Pressure	High; well-practiced and consistent	Variable; can break down with stress

What Would You Do in the Two Minutes Before the Lights Go Out?

Imagine yourself in the cockpit with the engine ticking over and the grid shaping up ahead. The essential question is: how do you keep your mental state stable, lean on your strengths, and avoid the classic performance pitfalls of anticipatory worry [extended exhale breathing](#) and scattered focus?





Based on what we've covered:

1. Engage your pre-session routine—feel its actions, hear its sounds, and let these familiar movements groom your working memory away from distractions.
2. Practice your extended-exhale breathing precisely, timing your exhale to deliberately calm your physiology.
3. Focus outward; zero in on your racecraft cues rather than results or “what ifs.”
4. Let the routine do the mental heavy lifting so you can trust your embodied skills behind the wheel.

Routines are not magic potions or empty slogans: they are proven process tools, low barrier to execution, and reliable anchors for peak performance under pressure.

Share Your Thoughts and Experiences

If you're involved in motorsport or any high-pressure activity, have you tried using routines over mental tricks? What worked best for you to manage your mental state and sharpen focus? Share your stories and tips on social media—let's keep this practical, evidence-based discussion moving.

Use the hashtags **#RacingRoutines** and **#FocusInMotorsport** when sharing on:

- Facebook
- Twitter/X
- Reddit
- LinkedIn
- Pinterest

Further Reading

- GOV.UK Mental Health and Work Guidance
- The Role of Routines in Performance Under Pressure (Frontiers in Psychology)
- Sports Psychology on Mental Toughness and Focus (BPS)