

Nineteen years ago this coming May we ran our first students down the track at our Drag Racing School in Gainesville, Florida. Months of work had gone into building cars, constructing a race shop, hiring staff, developing a curriculum, and getting the word out to the racing community. We couldn't wait to get started. I had bet everything I had on the belief that a program like this was not only going to be popular but was needed in our sport. Road racing had the Bondurant, Barber and Russell schools but nowhere could you learn to drag race in a professional and formal environment. Everyone, including myself had learned from the "trial and error" method with, in my case especially, emphasis on the "error" part. But now there was going to be a better way to learn. So there we were, armed with cars, equipment, staff, a beautiful race track and dreams.

To say that every aspect of the last 19 years has turned out as I had envisioned, planned or hoped would be untrue. We have, like any racing program, had our good times and bad times. I and my staff have learned a tremendous amount over the years and continue to do so on a regular basis. The program, our curriculum, our teaching

methods and our attitudes and understandings have undergone a huge transformation over the past two decades.

I started teaching with a fairly good understanding of what I call the “mechanics of driving”. In other words, exactly how you do a burnout, control the car and throttle, back up, stage, leave, handle the car and get it stopped. My instruction nineteen years ago was pretty much limited to that. I’d explain what to do and the student would either do it right or wrong. If they could do it... great. If they couldn’t do it, well, I guess they should do something else. Back then I simply did not have an understanding of the many and often complex reasons for an individual’s poor performance. I didn’t know why you couldn’t do it ... you just couldn’t. Then I would move onto the next driver, who hopefully wouldn’t have as much trouble.

Thankfully over the years I became, increasingly interested in first, understanding the many intricate aspects of human performance and second, the process of taking someone that is having difficulty with something, understanding exactly what the problem is, working with

them to find a solution and participating in their excitement when they finally got it!

I guess I became more compassionate. I developed empathy for the new driver. I became increasingly aware of and fascinated by the human mind and emotions... thoughts, fears, aspirations, desires, anger, guilt, denial, blame and more. When I started to study the psychological aspects of performance with new drivers, both formally through existing research and practically with drivers in our courses, I came to a remarkable discovery. The same problems, at least from a psychological standpoint, that prevented many new drivers from achieving good performance were the same problems that often prevented experienced drivers from achieving optimum performance. For sure the experienced driver could drive the car better than a new driver but as the experienced driver increased in their skill level, so did the competitors and therefore the driver was constantly in a state of feeling under pressure to outperform the competition and in a sense putting him or herself in a similar psychological position as the new driver. I realized the experienced drivers, like the new drivers,

were often stressed... and over stressed. They had a "fear" of poor performance that continued throughout their careers even though their physical skills were constantly improving. They had in a sense improved and matured mechanically in their driving skills without maturing psychologically. In spite of the fact that some sports coaches and participants say, "the fear of losing is what motivates me to win", "fear" is a terrible motivator and we speak a great deal in our classes about this very topic. Fear of failure, embarrassment and poor performance often exists in the minds of both beginners and experienced drivers alike. It can be destructive, debilitating and rarely produces good performance.

So, as fate would have it, over the years of teaching I developed a fascination for the psychological aspects of our sport and the more we worked on this, the more racers, at every level, from rookie to World Champion, wanted to work with us.

We are pleased and proud that our graduates represent some of the best in the business like this years champs Larry Dixon – Top Fuel,

Tony Pedregon – Funny Car, Greg Anderson – Pro Stock, Geno Scali – Pro Stock Bike and of course our Pomona, California instructor Jack Beckman in Super Comp.

Over the course of this year I will write a series of columns that will deal with issues or situations you may face in your racing program or your daily life. My goal is that, in these words there will be something that will be of benefit to you. A thought or principal that you may apply personally in your racing or everyday life that will help you in a profound way or even a small way. Because, after 19 years, 15,000 students and watching 60,000 runs down the race track, I have learned that our business is not at all about cars. It's all about people.