

HOW DIFFICULT IT CAN BE A GIFT

YOUR BIG OPPORTUNITY – HOW DO YOU RESPOND?

BY CONOR DALY • PHOTOS BY PAOLO PEDICELLI



It was the biggest test of my young career – a Formula Master car (like a GP3 car) on a Formula 1 circuit – the Hungarian. What would I be expected to know, how quickly could I get integrated with the team, could I learn the circuit quickly and how could I make a good impression?

The mindset of so many drivers in such a situation is “don’t crash” because so much can depend on the outcome of a good test. When I arrived in Budapest, it was freezing cold. I was testing with a Dutch team, AR Motorsports, so there would be a culture clash but at least everyone spoke English. When they pulled the cars out of the trailer I was immediately in awe. I couldn’t believe that I was going to drive one of them.

The Formula Master car looked like a small F1 car. It had all the fancy aerodynamic bits that you could think of and I couldn’t wait to see what it drove like.

I walked the track in the morning to begin to identify some reference points and it was really impressive. The tire marks from Ferrari driver Felipe Massa’s big crash when he got hit in the head with a spring were still there. That was intimidating.

While strapped in and waiting to go out for the first time, I began to understand that this car was more sophisticated than anything I had ever driven before. The clutch was on the steering wheel. I only had two pedals, just like a kart, and I would shift gears with paddles behind the steering wheel. Simply put, the car was incredible.

Using the paddles to shift meant my hands were always on the steering wheel, which I thought allowed me to commit to the corners more. The car also had quite a bit of power, which was something I had to learn to control with my right foot! In addition to sticking to the basics of identifying my reference points in my early laps, I knew that I needed to understand what type of inputs (steering, brakes, etc.) the car liked. Basically, all race cars do the same things; they just do them at differing levels and with a different feel.

Although still freezing cold, the day was going pretty well; I was at the top of the timesheets most of the morning and the car was just awesome to drive. My biggest issue was that my hands were so cold they were throbbing, so I put rubber gloves on over my fireproof gloves and all was good. The sound, the grip and the performance of the car was incredible. I was feeling good, I was fast, having fun and I thought I could go faster.

The debriefing was normal. I felt very comfortable in the car and confident that I was learning a lot and getting on top of the situation. What I needed to work on, according to the braking data graphs, was braking deeper into some of the corners, especially at the end of the long front straight. I thought I was braking unbelievably late as it was but they wanted me to try a little harder.

Just before lunch we decided to put on a better set of used tires as opposed to new ones because the team knew that I was still learning.

I went out of the pits very conservatively and could feel I was driving on ice. I went to accelerate out of turn two and suddenly I found myself sliding backwards. I never had a car spin that quickly before. I slid backwards initially, then sideways and hit the guard rail with the nose and front wing.

Luckily the nose and front wing absorbed most of the impact and since I was going pretty slowly the car wasn’t badly damaged. I immediately felt terrible. I had just crashed on a test day with a new team. Throughout the day I think five or six other drivers did exactly the same thing as me on cold tires. The conditions were very difficult until the tires got warm. I was a bit stunned but realized that if that could happen that fast, I needed to learn from the experience.

It’s always difficult to report to the team that the car is damaged but I just told them as honestly as I could what I thought happened. I must admit that I didn’t immediately believe that it was simply a “cold tire” issue but when the same thing happened to so many other drivers that day I realized that it can happen that quickly. Lesson learned.

When I think back to the incident, I realized that drivers get involved in similar incidents almost every day on the race track but the only way to learn from the mistake was to actually admit and acknowledge what really happened. The opposite of that would be to attempt to blame someone or something and run from the issue personally. My dad always told me

that being honest and transparent is the fastest way to learn.

The team did an outstanding job and the car was repaired very quickly. I was back out again pretty soon after the lunch break getting quicker and quicker every lap. The car was really impressive. I had to forget about the accident and focus on going fast and learning as much as possible. I could hardly believe how late the car could brake into turn one from 160mph.

The car was extremely quick and it was a joy to drive! We were alerted that new tires needed to go on around 2 p.m. as after that the track would get cold, damp and slow. At about 2 p.m. everyone started putting on their new tires and the times started to tumble.

At the end of the second flying lap there was a red flag stoppage. The fastest time of the day had just been set by Jenzer Motorsport, the German championship-winning team. I had a very small window of opportunity and I knew that I had lost the first heat cycle on the new tires. It was just like a qualifying session when I hit the track again. The car had just a little too much understeer but the overall grip level was up and I knew I didn’t have time to stop for an adjustment. I set my personal best times almost immediately but I couldn’t quite match the Germans.

The day came to a close and I was third quickest. I was somewhat disappointed because I felt more speed was within our grasp. What a day, what a learning curve. I don’t know if I have ever jammed so much learning into one day. •

DEREK DALY ACADEMY USING A MISTAKE TO BECOME STRONGER

Something that must be understood when developing young drivers is that they will make mistakes. Whenever it happens it can easily be categorized as brain fade. Sometimes tools get might thrown around (depending on the amount of damage), voices raised or all of the above.

It is very important to understand that drivers learn lessons just like small children do, by experience. If a small child inadvertently puts his hand on a hot kitchen surface, the resulting fright and sting will likely prevent him from ever doing that again. I regularly say to drivers that they will never learn what not to do without ever doing it. What drivers have to be super careful of is that the consequences of a mistake might paralyze a driver into not performing at his very best.

If a driver makes a poor decision that causes damage or gets over-confident and leaves the road as a result, the greatest thing that can happen is that he recognizes why the accident

happened, processes the information correctly and uses the incident to become stronger. The opposite would be a driver who cannot process the information correctly (or does not want to be honest enough to do so).

Instead he blames himself, someone else or the car, and the incident becomes a confidence sapper and potentially weakens his relationship with the team.

The result can be a driver that becomes weaker after an incident and therefore more vulnerable.

When you apply effective coaching to this model, the coach’s responsibility is not to just talk a driver through an incident and then forget it. A coach’s responsibility is to accurately assess whether such incidents are a common occurrence and if so, work out what element of a driver’s “package” needs to be further developed to stop such occurrences in the future. Drivers who do not recognize and/or take personal responsibility for incidents that they cause and therefore do not learn from the mistakes will likely carry the same



» Derek Daly (l) with Bernie Ecclestone (r) at the Cdn. GP.

traits from karting into race cars. I like to see these types of issues addressed as early as possible in a driver’s career as opposed to the option of getting the lesson later in a career in a much more expensive race car.

Mistakes are common in racing and can be powerful learning moments. The man who never made a mistake never made anything.

For more information on driver development, visit www.derekdalyacademy.com. To see video of Conor’s Formula Master test, log on to www.conordaly.net. •