

# Think Yourself Faster

If you want to win, or even just improve, then you have to use your head – you have to think. But where do you start? To guide you, MotoX has teamed up with top UK sports psychologist Mike Garth, who knows a thing or two about making mortal man ride faster...

Words: Mike Garth | Images: Geoff Meyer

If you remember bike manufacturers like CCM, Italjet or Puch and think of 'Top 35' rather than 'British MX1 Championship' then you may well have heard of Kevin Ruddock. Kevin rode Hondas when Graham Noyce was on his way out and Dave Thorpe was on his way in, and if there was one thing Kevin could do it was grab a holeshot.

No matter what the terrain Ruddock was your holeshot king; for no more than two blistering laps he was the quickest guy out there. Back then, when a change from the old two 40-minute plus two-lap moto format was considered at GP level, some wag suggested that the ACU pressure the FIM into running 40 separate two-minute motos at each GP, thus setting things up for a 'Kevin Ruddock: Britain's World Motocross Champion' celebration...

So why was Kevin Ruddock often the conqueror of Noyce, Hudson, Watson and Thorpe over one lap but nowhere near them after five? Even without the nutritional and fitness knowledge of today, it was unlikely a national level rider capable of completing a GP would blow a gasket after just one lap. It could well have been a result of what went on (or did not go on) between his ears, that is, his psychology.

Before you think up images of men in white coats sitting you down on a comfortable couch and asking you naughty questions about your mother, note that there's a difference between clinical psychology and sport psychology. If you're clinically schizophrenic, for example (and not just after a night on the Stella), then a psychiatrist or clinical psychologist is what you need. In which case, please put this magazine down, keep away from small children and ask your doctor for a referral. However, if you're a (relatively, for a motocrosser...) healthy, balanced, normal individual who would like to modify your mindset to try and improve your riding, then sport psychology is for you.

Concentrate and pick your lines, like Tommy...

Image: Oliver Lawman

## What's in it for you?

Sport psychology concerns your mood, your behaviour and your thoughts, and it provides practical techniques for changing one or more of these three things to help you perform better. The performance gain we'll look at in this article is **concentration**. It's possible this is the area that affected Mr Ruddock.

## Exploring Concentration

Believe it or not your concentration is made up of four different elements (psychologists call these elements 'styles'), they are things that you think of, or are aware of, during a race or activity...

1. If there's just a couple of things going on in your head, this is called: **narrow-internal style**. For example: 'have I got my tyre pressures right for this wet track?'
2. If there's many things in your head it's known as: **broad-internal**. For example: 'that's the third lap in a row that guy in front has gone wide entering that corner, if I can get close enough through the whoops on the next lap then next time round he's mine, leaving me one more lap to hang on in front.'
3. If there's just a couple of things bouncing around your wee mind about the world around you this is called: **narrow-external**. For example: watching only for the gate to drop, oblivious to everything else you could see or hear.

**'Even if you are a pro rider then your psychology is one area where you can gain an advantage over your rivals. If your team-mate has the same bike, fitness regime and bike handling skills as you then what else have you got that will allow you to beat him?'**

4. And if there's loads of things going on in your mind from the world around you, this is known as: **broad-external**. Example: seeing your pit-board, noticing a new rut being formed over a jump, smelling the two-stroke oil of the guy you just passed and hearing a gaggle of riders catching up behind you, all in the space of a few seconds.

The Clubman riders amongst you may think that the style of 'broad-internal' is impossible on a motocross bike: 'I have enough trouble just hanging onto my bike let alone thinking about a passing strategy!' However, such a tactic has its place if you want to perform well and is part of what separates riders like Stefan Everts from the rest of us. Michael Schumacher, for example, can have a full conversation on his car-to-pit radio whilst setting the fastest lap in an F1 car.

## Think Right

There is no one 'best' concentration style for all situations, you need to be flexible across all four. The name of the game is to match your style of concentration with what the race demands at any point in time. Your job is to use the right style at the right time.

A blinding example of this is during the start. If you're in full-on 'broad-internal' mode as the gate's about to drop ('have I put enough fuel in? If I hit that uphill double wide open in third I know I'll clear it OK. I can feel that hangover really kicking in now and I reckon I'll get bad arm-pump') then you're distracting



While others follow... Stefan concentrates on his own line.

Think yourself faster

Sports Psychology

James Stewart might be all smiles after a race, but before he's a picture of concentration

yourself from the job in hand. You're wasting concentration on things that don't matter to you right then. Therefore less of your concentration will be available to see the gate drop and react to it. As the race progresses and you're blindly following the lines of the guy in front ('narrow-external') then you'll be less able to plan your passing strategy and get past that guy riding between you and victory. You will have used these two concentration styles at the wrong times. You lose!

To move around the different styles as you need to is easier said than done because we're all good at some styles and weak at others (there's even a simple questionnaire to measure this.) It's exactly the same as being, say, a good bike rider on a muddy track and weak on hard-pack. We have our natural strengths and weaknesses.

**'Schumacher, for example, can have a full conversation on his car-to-pit radio whilst setting the fastest lap in an F1 car.'**

## Pressure

Pressure is another influence that can make it difficult for you to do the right thing at the right time. When you feel under pressure this will be because of one or more of four things: lack of time, lack of space, high fatigue and high anxiety.

This pressure will effect your concentration in four ways: you have less ability to move between concentration styles, you resort to using the style you're good at, you narrow-down your focus and you have 'paralysis by analysis' (you focus too much inside your head). So if you're naturally strong at focussing on just one thing, then when fatigue kicks in at the end of a race, you may struggle to read your pit-board telling

you to make one more pass to get the overall win. Pressure has caused you to see not much more beyond the end of your front mudguard. This is great for starts, though, and you can see that anxiety can sometimes be a good thing. Pressure can be your friend, not always your enemy!

## What can you do?

If you're motivated to do well with your riding then it's likely you'll already review and reflect upon your races. This could simply mean going through the race in your head in the van on the way home, whereas the pro riders will formally sit down with their mechanics and team staff and dissect the good and bad points of the weekend. What did you do well that you must do more of and what one thing will you change for the better next time out? You don't go from AMCA junior to MXGP rider overnight, you've got to chip away at it. (There's a rule in coaching, no matter what the sport, that says you become a real 'expert' only after 10,000 hours of quality practice. That's around 20 hours a week for 10 years!)

Going through a review like this will raise your awareness of your own concentration style. What do you see/hear/feel/think when you're riding well and, similarly, when you're riding badly? Write it down then ask someone's opinion of you with the same questions (make sure you ask someone you trust!). Is there a pattern? How does what you see/hear/feel/think relate to the four concentration styles and at what point in the race? Do you notice many things when on the start line? Do you get marshals screaming at you because you didn't see a waved yellow? Do you worry about all the difficult sections of the track coming up when riding the easier bit?

With this increased awareness (and you'll have to keep topping this awareness up, it's not a 'once-only' deal) you'll become better at knowing what concentration style you favour and whether this matches where you need it to be. You now need a toolbox of mental switches to actively change your concentration style at certain times, when you feel yourself becoming distracted. These are called 'concentration cues'.



**'Pressure can be your friend,  
not always your enemy!'**

Lose concentration for a moment and motocross will bite you on the ass!

## Cue Changes

Concentration cues are very individual, however, three basic types exist: verbal, visual and physical.

A **verbal cue** is usually a single word repeated silently (or even out loud) at the appropriate moment. For example: 'focus,' or 'gate,' or 'lines'.

A **visual cue** involves focussing on something specific from what's in front of you. Example: staring at the start gate, deliberately looking up on the exit of a corner, looking at your pit-board.

**Physical cues** involve you doing something, so these are harder to do during a race and so are less important for motocross. Example: clapping your hands together on the start-line.

The key is to be aware of what works for you and what can be incorporated into your routine and riding style. Linking verbal cues with visual ones is often done by whoever looks after your pit-board. This isn't rocket science, but many of us need more than a nudge to apply some common sense to our riding.

## About the Author

Mike Garth is a sport psychologist and ex-F1 racing car engineer. He owns the Sun1400 Performance Coaching Consultancy and can be contacted at: [mike.garth@sun1400.com](mailto:mike.garth@sun1400.com)

Back when four-strokes were about to die out (so we thought) he rode schoolboy MX. He even managed to beat a very young Paul Malin at a time when MotoX magazine's test rider walked the paddock announcing: 'Hi, I'm Paul and I'm five!' (See November 2006 issue!)

Mike was responsible for the mechanical development of the Reynard Champ Car/IndyCar and helped the company win seven World Series titles, providing support for Jacques Villeneuve and J-P Montoya. Two years in track engineering with Toyota F1 then followed and lead to an MSc in sport psychology (it was always the nut behind the steering wheel that you needed to tighten the most...).

Now registered with the British Association of Sport and Exercise Sciences as a sport psychologist, Mike has, amongst other clients, helped international triathletes, a Formula Ford racing driver and a team of management consultants to perform better.

Think it through, try it, review it, develop it and try again. As you progress you'll learn more about what racing demands, more about your concentration and, gradually, how you can control your own concentration across the four styles.

## How will this help you go faster?

Being able to switch between different concentration styles when you want is what will bring marked improvement.

Having a higher level of physical fitness, a decent recovery/preparation strategy and taking on board good nutrition will delay fatigue and reduce the negative effects of pressure not just late in the race, but over the course of a race weekend too. You'll maintain flexibility in your concentration and, by using the mental skill of 'concentration cues', you'll have more control on what you focus on and when you focus on it.

If you attend to the right things at the right time you may feel more skilled in what you're doing, giving you a sense of having more time and so of being under less pressure. Quick riders always look to have all the time in the world - they never look rushed.

Know where you need to be with your concentration and know how to get there and you will be on your way. Perhaps this is where our man Ruddock lost out? Was his 'narrow-external' style so dominant that his lightning starts were followed by not enough attention to pacing, tactics and the many demands of a changing track? Who knows? Even for motocross folk like you, me and Kevin Ruddock the human mind is a complex thing so it's hard to be sure, but we can be sure that complex things can always be improved.

Unless you are a pro rider you're unlikely to reach the limit of your bike's performance. Your lap times are far more likely to be limited by you and, in particular, by your psychology. As well as concentration, it's about your motivation and self-confidence too.

Even if you are a pro rider then your psychology is one area where you can gain an advantage over your rivals. If your team-mate has the same bike, fitness regime and bike handling skills as you then what else have you got that will allow you to beat him?

Sport psychology can make you a much better rider. Think about it... ❌