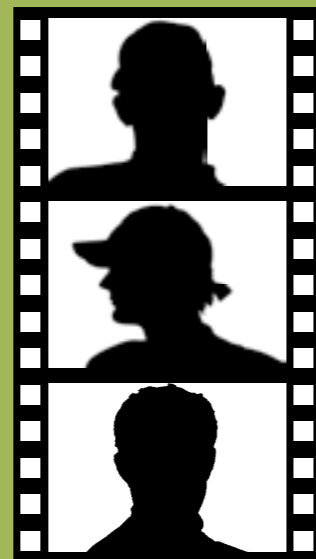


FACT: it's the guys who have a professional attitude who become winners. You think Ricky Carmichael and Stefan Everts were just lucky? Their success was a fluke? Nope, they were both infinitely professional, and here's how you can follow in their footsteps...

THE PROFESSIONALS



Words: Mike Garth

Who is the most professional person you know in the world of motocross? Stefan Everts? Ricky Carmichael? Josh Coppins? Simon Swan...? (If you think the latter then I suggest you refer yourself to a psychiatrist and take a glance at the first sport psychology article in MotoX, from January 2007, to understand what one is...)

For an old codger like me, two great names from motocross' rich history stick out when it comes to professional attitude: Keith Thorpe and Gaston Rahier. There are plenty of others too, such as Roger de Coster and David Bailey, but those first two names really stand out for me.

In reading this article, I aim for you to understand why I believe this and how it can transfer to you and your own riding.

What is it about the person you think is the 'most professional' that gets them your vote? How would you define 'most professional'? Well, in the last of a series of three MotoX articles on sport psychology we will introduce the performance gain of professional attitude to add to the work on concentration and mental toughness that we've already covered.

Professional attitude is what we all need to improve how we think, how we feel and how we behave, whatever our standard or riding. If you want to set yourself up to perform better then read on!



Image: Yamaha





Image: Frank Hoppen

What's in it for you?

The definition I use for professional attitude is a simple one: 'a professional attitude allows you to identify and control as many of the controllable factors in your preparation and performance as possible.'

In sport psychology we call this 'controlling the controllables', or, as I put it: 'c the c's'. Such a professional attitude is a very large part of what made Keith Thorpe and Gaston Rahier as hugely successful as they were; you can follow this and improve by taking onboard their approach.

In aiming to 'c the c's' Keith Thorpe steered his son to more world championship motocross titles (three) than any other Brit before or since. Quite simply, he was the 'ultimate motocross dad' in spanning Dave's bikes from schoolboy MX right up to his retirement.

Gaston Rahier, meanwhile, was a tiny Belgian whose total focus and professionalism brought him three consecutive world 125 titles in the mid-'70s. He was the first person to win the eighth-litre world crown and went on to become a Dakar Rally legend. Known as 'the little man with the giant reputation' he sadly died from cancer in 2005.

Many times in my childhood and youth I saw Keith Thorpe 'c the c's'. A late-'80s sidecar-cross GP at Farleigh Castle was once run alongside a British Open Class solos round. With the solos just running on the Sunday, their trucks could be seen entering the paddock whilst the outfits had their Saturday free practice. Mid-Saturday morning the HRC box trailer carrying Thorpe's bikes, towing a caravan and driven by Keith Thorpe, could be seen rolling into the paddock way before any of the other solo competitors rocked up. This is something KT was well known and admired for. It is said there are usually three races in any motocross: one to get to the first turn, one to get to the chequered flag and one to get the hell out of there once the racing is over. Well, Keith Thorpe believed in another race: to get into the paddock, choose the best spot and get everything in order ready for the rider to arrive. He was world champion at that.

Gaston Rahier sticks in my mind from the 1976 125 GP at Hawkstone Park, from which I have my first memory of world class motocross. There, as a five-year-old upstart, I heard the Clerk of the Course telling my Dad how Rahier had to leave the Saturday night international jury meeting well before 9pm as he 'had to go and eat and get to bed on time' on the eve of race day. Maybe it's because at five years old I cared so much about doing all I could to be allowed to stay up later that it sticks in my mind? However, for a rider who was already a world champion, it's just such an attention to detail that shows the right professional attitude.

Joel Smets is another guy who was known for his work ethic and professionalism. It's clear that his late start in motocross, combined with 'less than superstar' talent didn't get in the way of his success at world level. A rider with a similar professional attitude, but with clearly more athletic and bike riding talent, is the King – himself recently retired fellow Belgian Stefan Everts, a rider renowned for 'caring about the small things'. Here is an example of what you get when you match a supreme professional attitude with amazing raw talent: one of the greatest riders ever to chuck their leg over a motocross bike!

I can't guarantee you that a more professional attitude will bring you multiple world titles like Stefan, as basic talent has obviously got a lot to do with it, but I can guarantee you that the quick and successful guys have bucket-loads of professional attitude, no matter how talented they are. A professional attitude is something that can make us all ride better.

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What can you do?

To develop your professional attitude you can follow a three-step process that we'll go on to describe. Just as we did previously with both 'concentration' and 'mental toughness' the key to making sport psychology work for you and become a better rider is to break all aspects of the mental side of riding down into manageable and easily understandable chunks. For example, take a look at the recent Ben Townley interview in MotoX 45 where he talks about 'breaking his riding down into small sections'. Think about anybody you know who is really good at anything, and I really mean anything, and I'll bet you they can break down what they know and what they do into a series of key aspects within which success lies. That's why I listed the four styles of concentration and the nine aspects of mental toughness for you in the previous articles.

'...the key to making sport psychology work for you and become a better rider is to break all aspects of the mental side of riding down into manageable and easily understandable chunks.'

Step One

Now then, the first step of our three-step process is to sit down with your dad/mechanic/team boss/riding buddies and write down all the things to do with motocross, both on and off the bike, that you can control. This list will not just include the things you control already, but will include all the things you should be controlling but aren't at the moment. You need to be open minded and should start by 'throwing things down on paper' quickly, then gradually take more time to discuss the options and come to decisions on what you agree on with the rest of your 'team'.

To get you started, I suggest you can control: bike setup, setup in the paddock, the quality and state of your riding gear, diet, hydration, fitness, concentration, mental toughness, motivation, effort, enjoyment, bike handling skill, your lines and your performance.

Step Two

The second step is similar to the first but your task is to compile a list of all the things related to your riding that you cannot control. Go about creating this list in exactly the same way as for the first step. To help you take it forward, I suggest you cannot totally control: the weather, track surface, other people's opinions/expectations (including those of the officials), luck, illness and winning/losing. It's key to remember that uncontrollable factors are usually the same for everybody, so there is nothing to be gained by worrying about them.



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It's important for your own development that you come up with items in each of these two steps. However, one thing you must accept you can control is your performance. Two things you must accept you cannot control are winning and losing. Yes, you might block-pass someone, but how can you 100% control that they won't block-pass you?

Step Three

The third step is the most important and involves focussing your concentration and effort on what you can control. You now need to start acting, and develop strategies for controlling what you've agreed you should and could be controlling. Your aim should be to focus on the processes in your motocross that help you ride to the best of your talent. That is your technique, your decisions, your effort, and all aspects of your performance.

Start by taking one factor that is outside your control at the moment but in the first step of our process you agreed you should be taking care of. List the strategies that may be used to begin controlling this factor in training, practice and during a race. You can go ahead and list strategies for other factors but I suggest you do this one factor at a time.

When you change something, make it stick! For example, if you agreed 'fitness – flexibility (good for injury prevention)' then commit to: identify a list of key stretches for the appropriate muscle groups. Ensuring you learn the correct technique for each stretch. Completing 10 minutes of stretching twice a day. Defining a method of measuring your stretching performance once per week and evaluating your change in flexibility.

How will this help you go faster?

If you truly do 'control the controllable' factors of your riding and preparation then you'll control your nerves too and keep them at a level that allows you to get the job done. You'll have all your pre-race routines worked out that keep you calm but sufficiently busy so that again you keep your nerves at just the right intensity for you. Your self-confidence will be boosted by the knowledge that you can answer 'what if' questions such as the following: what if you start badly and have to get rid of your goggles early on? (You have a spare pair in a zip-lock bag with your mechanic.) What if this sandy track ups your fuel consumption and you run out of petrol? (You did a consumption check in practice and combined with expanding the tank for this race you know, with an appropriate safety factor, you have enough fuel to get you round.)

The End, for now...

I hope you have enjoyed this series of three articles on sport psychology and that you make a solid attempt to bring some of these aspects into your mental approach to riding, whether schoolboy, clubman or pro.

All the things you can do to improve the thinking side of your riding will take time to show improvement, just in the same way you won't become a muscle-bound He-Man in a short space of time after starting down at the gym. (In fact, you won't become a muscle-bound He-Man at all if you were born without a certain body type.)

Image: Yamaha



'If you truly do 'control the controllable' factors of your riding and preparation then you'll control your nerves too and keep them at a level that allows you to get the job done.'



Image: Frank Melling

A professional attitude is something that can make us all ride better.

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.

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 this 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.

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You should remember that all these mental skills are learned and can be learned by you, if you put the right amount of the right effort in. Overnight miracles will never happen but lots of poor practice will not make for high performance. Only lots of quality practice leads to high performance and nothing will ever be perfect, it wasn't for Stefan Everts, Keith Thorpe or even Gaston Rahier.

If nothing else, take on board what the great American athlete Ed Moses (a man unbeaten for a whisker under ten years) had to say about professional attitude: "ain't no use worryin' 'bout things beyond your control, 'cause if they're beyond your control, ain't no use worryin'..."

"Ain't no use worryin' 'bout things within your control, 'cause if you got them under control, ain't no use worryin'..."

Do you have the professional attitude needed to get to where you want to be? Think about it, 'control the controllables', and get out there and ride! 