American Psychological Association

Jack Stark, PhD — Performance Psychologist

ON TRACK

Did you know that in a tenth of a second, there are 1,200 chemical changes in the human body? Psychologist Jack Stark, PhD, knows this.

That's because he works in one of the most mentally challenging sports in the world: stock car racing. And his drivers need to know how to deliver.

Stark joined Hendrick Motorsports in 2001 and helps keep the 550-employee company running smoothly. On the job, he has three roles — sport psychologist, industrial/organizational psychologist and clinician. The scope of his job is so broad that on a typical day, he may start the morning with a critique of a pit crew drill and end it by counseling an engineer who is struggling with depression.

"It's such an intense business," Stark says, "so about half of my time is helping with whatever is going on in their lives — whether it's a kid's illness or relationship trouble — so they can focus on performance."

To perform in a high-stakes sport like NASCAR, it's essential to know what kind of pressure a body and mind can sustain. Because racing or training takes up to 10 months a year, it's a challenge to keep the competitive edge mentally.

Stark uses science to help drivers find their "on" switch. He applies his research in human behavior and his background in clinical psychology to motivate drivers to focus on the task at hand.

"When you're taking a turn at 200 miles an hour," he says, "and you're thinking about what happened four laps ago — you're in trouble."



Evan Richman

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SPORT AND PERFORMANCE PSYCHOLOGY

Sport and performance psychologists identify psychological principles that can be applied to facilitate peak performance among athletes and in other performance-demanding venues.

NO "I" IN TEAM

Stark began his career as a clinical psychologist at a large Nebraska health care clinic. In 1989, he moved into sport psychology as the psychologist for the University of Nebraska's football team.

In his 12-year tenure, he worked with renowned college football coach — and educational psychologist — Tom Osborne, helping the Cornhuskers win three national championships. In that role, and every one since then, he applies what his background in psychology told him never fails — the "4P formula:" people + personality + process + purpose = success. This formula is discussed in Stark's book "The Championship Formula: How to Transform Your Team into a Dynasty."

Bringing these four elements together is what leaders in every sport, industry and organization shoot for.

The experience at Nebraska helps him in his work today. Stark has encouraged his company to recruit employees from college sports, after observing that working a pit crew is like a sport within the sport. To be able to change four tires within 12 seconds requires strength, agility, balance and concentration.

The company listened; they hired a college scout who looks for talented athletes from schools around the country so they can make the 4P formula work for them.

Stark has been part of 20 national championship teams in professional and college sports and has delivered more than 1,000 presentations on teamwork and leadership.

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