

Everything I Know About Project Time Management I Learned In Sports Car Racing

© 2009 by Stacy Goff, ProjectExperts President and *asapm* Co-founder

Introduction

The parallels between managing a successful project (including meeting due dates) and managing a successful sports car racing campaign are striking. In this article, we explore those parallels, and the insights to be gained even by those who have never experienced life “*at speed*”.

Background: for six years, from 1975 through 1981, the author raced in Sports Car Club of America’s West Coast circuit. While this was amateur racing, we competed with professional teams, who were funded by the factories. The rationale: excel on the track on the weekend, and buyers will flock to the showrooms to buy the cars the following week. And it worked!

We were occasionally successful competing with professional teams, but our greatest success came from a more-level playing field—Showroom Stock, where *The Great Racing Rabbit* set lap records on every track it ran, and was undefeated in three years of the toughest competitions West of the Mississippi. It is from these experiences that we can distill the essence of managing project time.



The Edge Moves

Life on the edge on a closed-course racetrack (one with left and right turns, plus plenty of vertical curves) is an all-time high—approaching self-actualization, for some people. And yet, the more you practice, and the more you understand your abilities and those of your car, the faster you go. What was the very edge of control last weekend is your starting-point for optimization this weekend.

Preparations during the week certainly help. Making minor adjustments or major expenditures for new racing tires could significantly improve performance.

Our preparations were focused on the major events, with consistent-enough individual event success hopefully leading to a season championship. Our success measures and strategies were clear to all. Risks (threats and opportunities) applied both to us and our competition.

Through it all, the edge continued to move, until each new improvement had only minor impact on our success—we had hit the wall. Then we tried radical new approaches to go faster. Some of them didn’t work at all; others did not work well at first, but opened the doors to new opportunities in the non-stop quest for speed.

Some drivers don’t know where lies the edge. They never fail, so they don’t know what it feels like. Worse, they never learned how to recover from that failure. The secret we discovered was to fail small, to fail safe. Some fail big: Dead drivers *never* learn. So our **first lesson** to learn from racing in Project Time Management is to learn how to fail small so you know where your edge lies.

The Science Of Driving Fast

On the track, there is a science to driving fast. As expounded upon by such racing demigods as Piero Taruffi¹ and Alan Johnson², it is not just a matter of zooming around the track, constantly on the edge of control. Instead, it is a precise combination of ballet, positioning and super-consciousness.

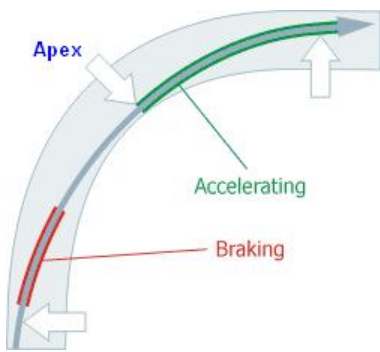
The difference between ineffective and effective *at speed* behavior can be seen in two scenarios; imagine yourself as a passenger in each:

Scenario A: Your car screams down the front stretch at redline and top-speed; the first sweeping right turn approaches. Heavy braking throws you first forward, then to the left. G-forces acting on your helmet make it impossible to see ahead: Your head is lolling about somewhere to your left and below the dashboard. You can, however, see your driver frantically steering, braking, clutching and shifting; and then repeating. Snapped back to the right, you hit the passenger-side window as you navigate through the first of the “Esses” (a series of S-shaped turns). Feeling like a bobble-head doll, you tuck your head into the next set of curves, and maintain more body control. Finishing the hot-lap, you get out of the car with legs wobbly, and high respect for the skill of the driver.

Scenario B: Quickly moving beyond the roar of the engine and the gravity forces acting on your body, you observe the near-transcendental calm of the driver as she precisely apexes the sweeper, skates through the Esses, and powers onto the back straight. You appreciate that she seems to be running 9/10's speed, perhaps to avoid terrorizing her passenger. The shifting, steering, braking, accelerating are purposeful and efficient, and their precise integration a wonder. You decide to ask, on your next ride, that she show you what 10 tenths feels like.

The difference: Scenario B was 2 seconds per lap faster than A in the same car. **Project Lesson:** Calm and precise can be faster than frantic and terrifying. The most-competent Project Managers are most-often speedily smooth, like the second driver; *not* chaotic and raucous.

Apexing and Maximum Speed: Part of the difference between merely *feeling fast* and *going fast* is to widen the curves. Tight turns slow you down; you lose momentum,



and your engine labors to regain that speed. Instead, faster drivers move from outer edge to inner edge, back to outer edge through the turn, significantly increasing the turn radius, and maintaining much higher speed. See the diagram at the left³.

Simple, yes? Similarly, in projects, maintain higher speeds by straightening or widening the curves. Project curves include new team-member startup, activity assignment initiation, and hand-offs between activities. Top-performing Project Managers smooth these curves with better communication, and with effective teamwork in structuring, estimating, delegation, scheduling and execution. Those who don't, aren't. **Project Lesson:** Smooth, widened curves can be the true critical path, and one secret to maintaining project momentum.

Minimizing Braking and Acceleration: If you want to go fast, minimize the braking and re-acceleration that you do. To illustrate, here is a personal story: When I started racing, I wore out brake pads and rotors really fast—and they often overheated. My friend and expert driver Dave Edgar informed me that *once I learned to drive fast, my brakes would really last*. It took an entire season to learn that lesson. Sure, I knew he was right, but just as in projects, knowing and performing are worlds apart.

An example of minimizing braking and acceleration in projects is the practice of incremental reviews of results rather than *big bang* end-of-phase reviews. Those who wait until end of phase for their reviews believe they are saving time. Yet, not only are they doing excessive braking, they are increasing the cost of detecting and correcting the defects; *and* they catch fewer of them, later. Alan Johnson taught that the last curve before a long straight is the most important curve on a track. You want to exit a phase or stage with enough momentum to carry into the long high-speed straight of the next immediate phase.

Some teams spend so much time getting through end-of-phase reviews that it's more like a long pit stop—and everyone passes you. You won't win races that way!

The Importance of Preparation

Success in sports car racing is 90% Preparation, and 10% Execution. To state it more clearly, no matter how good you are on the track, if you are not well-prepared, you fail. Similarly in projects, we see that the majority of the things that go wrong in most projects are the results of poor planning—and if you want to improve project success across *all* the vital signs, not just Time⁴, *plan better*.

In pre-race preparation, you make sure you have the right team members, the right "spare parts", and that all needed equipment and support is ready. You assess risks: Is it time to tear down the engine, or will it last another race? You look at trade-offs: Should we replace the gear ratios for this next incredibly tight, twisty track, or spend the time tweaking the suspension?

You review your funding, projecting how to make limited funds stretch through the end of the season. Truly learning how to do more with less, you might do things you would prefer to contract out to get a better job done, faster. All while tenderly treating, wiping down, waxing and grooming your car you will mercilessly throw through the nastiest curves in the West at Laguna Seca next weekend.



Teamwork Is The Key

Of course, a big part of that preparation is the team. Although there is only one person in the driver's seat, *the whole team drives* the successful car. Whether their role is chef, crew chief, parts runner, fueler, emergency repair mechanic, cheerleader, or timer *and* logger (gotta record those lap times to make sure the tweaks really helped), everyone on the team shares a role in the success story.

And so it is with projects. Example: One of the reasons why we involve all the team in Precedence Analysis is because it helps each establish the sense of urgency that less-competent Project Managers try to instill with fear. We don't just look at classic Time/Cost trade-offs when we do this precedence analysis. We also look at the trade-off impacts on Risk, Quality, Scope, and Project Management time (a very special type of human resource).

Related to PM time, planning the project with an intact team improves communication, and increases team member acceptance and effectiveness in managing their own part of the project. This is in contrast to those Project Managers who fail to optimize teamwork, and instead apply inept delegation, imposed deadlines, and inaction in response to raised issues. We've seen the successes generated by stellar teamwork, both in racing and in projects, and would not have it any other way.



Selling Projects To Your Stakeholders

Another important part of teamwork is selling your project to your Stakeholders. Our racing began with Oregon-based sponsorship; good-hearted managers and proprietors sharing the cost of parts, oil, tires and other essentials. But it was not until we really learned how to sell to the sellers that our racing sponsorships started to bloom. **The lesson we learned was not to focus on what we needed, but to emphasize *what was in it for them.***

After we settled on the VW Rabbit as our car of choice for our Showroom Stock efforts, we engaged the local VW dealership as a prime Sponsor. We also snared the biggest local radio station as a prime Sponsor, and did

joint appearances with them for their customers, creating buzz for ourselves, our Sponsor, and their customers. We turned the Great Racing Rabbit into a traveling billboard, and pointed out to our candidate Sponsors the thousands of favorable impressions per day in-person and in the media. Press releases and television interviews always made note of the Sponsors' role in our extended team that made the Great Racing Rabbit successful.

We tracked and reported the benefits to our Sponsors and their customers, keeping our visibility high. It helped when Sponsors got to ride on the victory lap in front of tens of thousands of cheering spectators. This *Selling Our Sponsors* effort was so successful we scored Nike Research as a sponsor. Their help added custom-built Nike shoes to our tee-shirt and jeans Great Racing uniforms. We looked more pro than the Pro teams! The difference: committed Sponsors and decision-makers are critical for every project team that wants to maximize success.

Balancing Priorities to Manage Time

The greatest threat to Project Time Management in small projects (e.g.: preparing for the next race) was changes in priorities. In large projects, we insist on full-time team member engagement, with their ongoing responsibilities managed by others during the project. But trying to balance "a real job" with the race car projects was much like the challenge facing those who must deliver enterprise-changing projects without letting their other responsibilities suffer. All of us have these *projects versus operations* dilemmas, and savvy Project Managers balance each.

We clearly had our priorities in place. The *real job* provided funding for the racing; the racing was our joy in life. And we had to make the choices to make both sets of priorities work. Not only that, but each week had not just one, but multiple projects that had clear due dates—they would not change the race date just because we weren't ready. This is where we learned ruthless prioritization, so we pared down the "nice to haves" on the project priority list to just the must haves.

Every March-October season was a portfolio of projects, each with funding, timelines, resources, risks, success measures, benefits, and talent. The portfolio included strategic choices: what were the likely consequences in year-end championship points if we chose to skip a far-away Riverside, California event? How could competing outside of Oregon help our Sponsors get desired exposure? How could spending more *earlier* help win more races and points so we did not have to compete so hard late in the season when everyone else was desperate?

Executing Well, While Adapting Even Better

Preparation was 90% of winning, but in a sport where success can be measured in tenths of seconds, that last 10% is a killer. In racing, you operate at 100% peak performance and acuity for an hour or more. At times in the last half of a race, those who could not sustain that level of intensity get brain-fade and do something stupid, like drive off the track at the end of a straight. This the result of a half-second distraction. We've seen few activities as attention-sensitive—aside from most projects.

This is complicated by the fact that once you get through the science of driving, apexing the curves, hitting braking points, and managing momentum, the actual race is *a test of strategies and willpower*. You see, at this level of competition, everyone has the “fundamentals” down pat. So winning is an intellectual exercise. Imagine a ballet performance, with exquisite moves across the stage in front of an appreciative audience—that is auto racing.

The difference is, the continuously-changing strategies and evolving strengths of each competitor causes each to re-think their own. That can occur dozens of times, with each parry and thrust; out-braking to the inside at the end of a straight, positioning to exit ahead at the end of a series of curves, or allowing two of your greatest competitors to wear each other down before you *just drive on by*.

Managing Expectations And Measuring Success

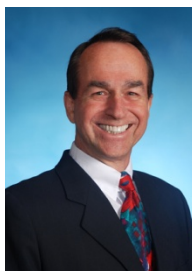
Racing and projects have much in common; from the timelines to the importance of managing expectations. The success measures, on the surface, are clear. Winning the race is the goal; and if not winning, then placing well. In projects, there are key differences, and these differences are not always so clear. As mentioned in our Levers and Gauges article⁵, the most effective Project Managers succeed first by agreeing on the measures of success, then by managing the leading indicators, and monitoring the trailing ones.

When it was clear that million-dollar professional racing teams could sweep first, second and third places in amateur sports car events, it was pretty important to let Sponsors know that placing in the top-half would be a superior accomplishment. That notice *always* occurred before the race, not afterwards. In projects, some Managers and Sponsors expect their Project Managers will work miracles, unless informed otherwise. Starve you of resources, give you an unrealistic deadline, and you will still thrive; how do they know? *It worked last time!* Thus we perpetuate PM heroics, rather than PM competence.

Lasting Insights

There are many things we learned in Sports Car Racing that play out in project after project today. In fact, any intense, committed effort, whether sports or leisure, intellectual or physical, can offer lessons to improve your time performance (and all your other success measures). The key is to apply that learning, and continue to perfect it. Most people can't work *significantly harder* to improve their Project Time Management, or the other Vital Signs. But with smarter practices, we *move our own edge* to produce 2x, 4x, 8x the project results with less effort.

About the Author



STACY A. GOFF, *aCCP.D*, PMP is president of ProjectExperts®, a Project Management consulting, methods, tools and training company. A co-founder of *asapm*, Stacy is the USA representative to IPMA, the International Project Management Association. He has also contributed to the success of Project Management Institute since 1983.

A Project Management practitioner since 1970 and consultant since 1982, his focus is to improve Enterprise or workgroup project management competence, productivity, and effectiveness. Mr. Goff provides project consulting services and presents workshops of great interest to Executives, Managers, Project Managers and Leaders, technical staff, and individual contributors.

His Project Management tools and methods are used by enterprises and consultancies on six continents. By 2000, his workshops had helped over 45,000 people improve their project success. He combines his PM Process insights with sensitivity for the human aspects of projects. **The result:** Measurably increased project performance.

¹ Piero Taruffi, *The Technique of Motor Racing*; Robert Bentley Inc., 1971.

² Alan Johnson, *Driving in Competition (The Need for Speed)*; CBS Publications, 3rd Ed. 1976. A champion Porsche driver, Alan has the most-accessible insights into driving at speed.

³ Go <http://www.kartcity.net/index.php?subj=driving&ctry=ie>; the source of this diagram is an Irish go-cart website that also shows strategies for more complex apexes.

⁴ We evaluate and manage **all** the Vital Signs, including Time, Cost, Scope, Risk, Quality, Talent, and Intended Benefits.

⁵ Our *Levers and Gauges* article is also published and available on the asapm.org and ProjectExperts.com websites.

A Postscript To This Article

We posted this article on the *asapm* Members-Only site in January 2009 before posting it here. To raise interest, we offered IPMA lapel pins for the first four comments we received. We received so many comments in the first day that we doubled the number of pins we awarded. Below are some of the comments.

Maria said: I really liked this article. The analogy to auto racing was well articulated. I especially liked the part about 'failing small'. Sometimes, one must resort to trial and error and the best lessons are our stumbling blocks or failures, but if you can work things out at a low expense, then you can apply that on a bigger scale.

From Scotty: I appreciate the analogy to assist others in associative learning. The fact not everyone will understand the dynamics of auto racing, I think the supporting comments taken from Project Management allow for a bridge to understanding "the race." Thanks for the perspective and conversation starter. We've been talking about your article here at the house for 30 minutes or better.

From Erik: This article shows that project management is not the exclusive domain of an organisation that can only be practised if the practitioner has studied a codex of knowledge. It shows that PM is truly daily stuff.

Every day, ordinary people manage projects. Be it coaching a minor league sports team, a cubs scout troupe camping trip or getting a man on the moon. It also shows that it is ALWAYS teamwork.

Alex weighs in: I know a race car driver from a local Toastmasters meeting, and I appreciate the comments on "teamwork". This individual NEVER says "I won a race", he always talks about the victory of the team. The driver has an important role, but without the pit crew, people watching the track, the coach talking in his ear about turns and competition, and all the other people who help out, the driver would never succeed.

One item that was not in the article -- communication. We all know how important it is for project managers to communicate. Racing crews go through incredible lengths to keep good communication. Despite the roar of engines and the chaos of the track, they are always working to communicate by sight, touch, and sound. Without great communication, the team cannot work together, and the team wins the race, not the driver alone.

Nice article, and I enjoyed learning a little more about Stacy. If you are ever in New Jersey and want to connect with some people to do go cart racing on a real track, let me know!

From Dan McKee, an asapm founder: Stacy, Excellent article. It was refreshing seeing PM principles applied in an out of the box application.

I use PM principles in my financial services business as well and find what I have learned in the PM discipline is applicable in many areas of my life.

I think you have hit upon something here in noting that the application of PM principles is not only applicable to the standard projects, but also in many other phases of business and personal life.....thanks...dan mckee.

From Les: Super good article! I particularly liked the point that the WHOLE TEAM drives the successful car!

And from taciturn Ed: Our friend Vladimir has told me that he learned everything he knows about project management during the Soviet era when his hobby was mountain climbing in the Urals. To get government approval for his expeditions, he and his fellow climbers were required to submit a written plan describing what they were trying to do, describing the resources they would take with them, and describing the threats they envisioned and their mitigation/contingency plans to manage them. I think your stories have several common threads.

Everything I know about project management, I learned while serving as the volunteer president of a homeowners' association. Our neighborhood was about 50 years old and a bit run down. The folks who were selling homes were either on their way to a retirement home or a mortuary. Young people could afford the houses because of their condition. We launched a set of little projects to inspire pride of ownership before inviting the city in to conduct a minimum housing code inspection and enforcement program. Managing volunteers over whom I held absolutely no power beyond persuasion was, and remains, the best learning experience of my life.

I think I'm saying that most of what we do in life that is worthwhile comes to a project or set of projects. We learn from doing them, though that is the painful way to learn. Thanks for your great article. --Ed

What are your comments? Email us: info@asapm.org