

BETWEEN THE STEERING WHEEL AND THE MIND: Psychology in the Context of High-Performance Motor Racing

ENTRE O VOLANTE E A MENTE: a psicologia no contexto do automobilismo de alta performance

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Abstract

Sport psychology in motorsport remains an incipient field, lacking more in-depth investigations. Drivers are constantly exposed to intense physical, cognitive, emotional, and social demands, which makes psychological work in this context particularly relevant. This study aimed to map and analyze the existing scientific literature on the subject through a narrative review of seven publications, including six scientific articles and one book chapter. For the analysis, the materials were organized into three thematic axes: everything on track, before the track, and beyond the track. The results highlighted the importance of physical and cognitive training for drivers' performance, revealing a gap in studies focused on the mental health of these athletes. Thus, we emphasize that deepening this field is to strengthen Sport Psychology, both in terms of performance and mental health in high-performance contexts.

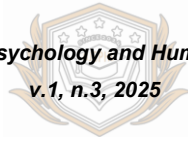
Keywords: Sport psychology; Motorsport; High performance; Mental health.

Resumo

A Psicologia no automobilismo esportivo constitui um campo ainda incipiente e carente de investigações científicas mais aprofundadas. Os pilotos estão constantemente expostos a demandas físicas, cognitivas, emocionais e sociais intensas, o que torna a atuação da Psicologia nesse contexto particularmente relevante. Este estudo teve como objetivo mapear e analisar a produção científica existente sobre o tema, por meio de uma revisão narrativa de sete publicações, sendo seis artigos científicos e um capítulo de livro. Para a análise, os materiais foram organizados em três eixos temáticos: tudo em pista, antes da pista e além da pista. Os resultados destacaram a importância do treinamento físico e cognitivo para o desempenho dos pilotos, evidenciando uma lacuna de estudos voltados à saúde mental desses atletas. Dessa forma, enfatizamos que aprofundar este campo é fortalecer a Psicologia do Esporte, tanto no desempenho quanto na saúde mental no alto rendimento.

Palavras-chave: Psicologia do Esporte; Automobilismo; Alta performance; Saúde Mental.

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1 INTRODUCTION

Sports Psychology, as a scientific field, has been gaining global prominence since the beginning of the 20th century. In Brazil, its institutionalization occurred in 1970 with the creation of the Brazilian Society of Sports Psychology, Physical Activity and Recreation, consolidating itself as a continuously growing area in the country (Samulski, 2009). The role of Psychology in Sports encompasses the improvement of performance and the promotion of mental health, emotional well-being, and the psychosocial development of athletes (Weinberg; Gould, 2017). Its role becomes even more relevant in high-performance contexts, where the pressure for results, media exposure, and the grueling routine compose a complex scenario, often full of pressures and adversities.

Motor racing represents one such context. Considered an elite sport, its demands go beyond technical and physical skills, requiring high emotional control, stress resistance, quick decision-making, and the ability to maintain focus under extreme conditions. Despite this, the role of Psychology in this universe remains underexplored, both in practice and in scientific literature. Although motor racing is widely recognized for its competitive appeal and constant media presence – with icons like Ayrton Senna, whose achievements transcend the sport and, even 30 years after his death, still impact the sport and fans – the public and institutional perception of the driver as an athlete is still limited (Dal Pogetto *et al.*, 2025; Potkanowicz; Mendel, 2013).

This lack of recognition directly impacts the visibility of the psychological demands placed on these professionals. Formula 1 drivers and other junior racing drivers live under high pressure, facing not only the inherent risks of the sport – accidents, injuries, and the possibility of death – but also psychological factors such as anxiety, fear of failure, team turnover, loneliness, and emotional exhaustion (Ribeiro *et al.*, 2018; Colagrai *et al.*, 2024). The intense routine, with physical, technical, and cognitive training, in addition to commitments with media and sponsors, contributes to a psychologically challenging environment (Ribeiro *et al.*, 2018). Although many athletes report difficulties related to mental health, the stigma still present in the sports world hinders the search for psychological support (Motorsport, 2024).

From a neuropsychological perspective, it is known that high-performance athletes develop brain patterns optimized for performance, especially in regions

associated with attention, decision-making, and emotional control, such as the prefrontal cortex (Rodrigues, 2022). This demonstrates the importance of systematic cognitive training practices, already widely used in sports more traditionally investigated by Sports Psychology. However, in motorsports, these strategies still lack systematized studies and broader applicability.

Beyond individual demands, motorsport is also a team sport. Although the race is performed individually, the driver's performance depends on a network of professionals – engineers, strategists, mechanics, physical trainers – whose cohesion and communication directly influence the results. Thus, aspects such as leadership, collective motivation, group dynamics, and organizational climate should also be considered within the scope of sports psychology (Stewart *et al.*, 2024).

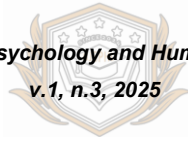
Given this, this study proposes to conduct a narrative review of the contributions of psychology in the context of motorsports, seeking to map the theoretical and methodological approaches present in the scientific literature, identify the main themes addressed, and point out gaps that can guide future research. With this, it aims to highlight the potential of Sports Psychology to expand its role in this still relatively unexplored, yet highly complex and relevant field.

2 METHODS: NARRATIVE REVIEW

This study adopted the narrative literature review method, aiming to explore and integrate, in a theoretical-conceptual way, existing knowledge about the role of Psychology in the context of motor racing. The narrative review is characterized by an interpretative and descriptive approach, allowing the authors to connect and critically discuss the findings based on a qualitative analysis of the selected materials (Cordeiro *et al.*, 2007).

The bibliographic search was conducted in widely recognized academic databases, including Google Scholar, PubMed and SciELO. The following terms were used as descriptors, combined with each other: "Psychology", "Automobilism", "Formula 1", "Motorsport", "Motorsport", and "Racing Drivers".

Based on this strategy, ten articles were initially identified. After reading the titles, abstracts, and full texts, six articles were selected for meeting the inclusion criteria. Additionally, a book chapter, already available to one of the authors, was included, totaling seven publications analyzed: six scientific articles (five in English and



one in Italian) and one book chapter in Portuguese. No restrictive criteria were established regarding the publication period, since the scarcity of materials in the area justified this broader search.

The inclusion criteria involved a direct relationship between Psychology and motorsports, with an emphasis on psychological aspects in high-performance sports. Articles with restricted access (paywall) and those that, although mentioning motorsports, addressed the topic from an industrial or technological perspective, disconnected from the psychological role in sports, were excluded.

It is important to emphasize that due to the scarcity of studies published in Portuguese, it was necessary to resort to works written in other languages, especially English and Italian, to ensure greater scope in the analysis and depth of discussion.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis of the studies identified in this study allowed for the identification of three thematic axes that structure the discussion of the data presented by the authors: 1. Everything on the track, 2. Before the track, and 3. Beyond the track (Table 1). Each axis will be detailed below based on the respective texts analyzed.

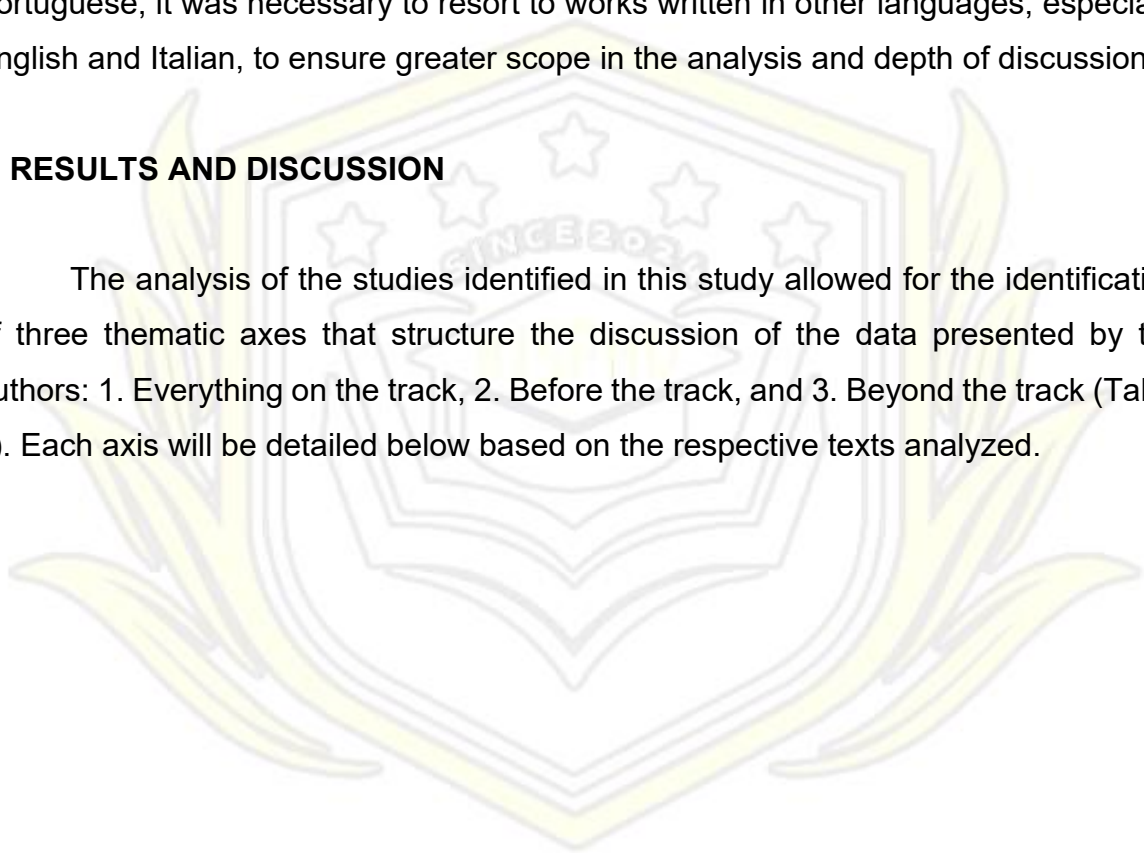
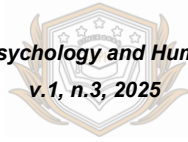


Table 1 - Studies classified into the three thematic areas

<i>Axle</i>	<i>Author(s) and year</i>	<i>Language</i>	<i>Focus of the work</i>	<i>Contribution to Sports Psychology</i>
1	Robazza and Bortoli (2015)	Italian	Physical and emotional aspects in pilot performance	The relationship between stress, emotions, and performance; the importance of emotional regulation.
1	Cozac and Cozac (2024)	Portuguese	Intrapersonal/interperson al intelligence, flow, visualization, and mental health.	Expands the role of sports psychologists in motorsports with a focus on overall development.
2	Lappi (2015)	English	Neurofunctional differences between drivers and race car drivers.	It highlights brain adaptations through deliberate practice; reinforces the role of neuroplasticity.
2	Lappi (2018)	English	Structure of deliberate practice and process automation	Reinforces structured cognitive training for performance in highly complex situations.
2	Milne, Coffee and Lavallee (2021)	English	Impacts of group cohesion on the performance of rookie pilots	It points out the risks of excessive cohesion; it highlights the importance of communication and social support.
3	Filho <i>et al.</i> (2015)	English	MAP model and optimal/suboptimal performance; visualization and situational awareness.	A tool for self-awareness; it promotes individualization in psychological training.
3	Brown, Revell and Stanton (2020)	English	MRLIN – Mental Load Index; assessment of cognitive demand in piloting.	It proposes a metric to measure mental workload and prevent mental burnout.

Source: Prepared by the authors, 2025



The articles are organized by axis, in chronological order, starting with the oldest. Axis 1 = Everything on track; Axis 2 = Before the track; Axis 3 = Beyond the track.

Axis 1. Everything on track.

The first section, entitled Everything on the Track, alludes to the article “Tutti in Pista” by Robazza and Bortoli (2015), and is complemented by the chapter “Psychology in Motorsport” by Cozac and Cozac (2024). Both address in an integrated way the physical, emotional, and psychological aspects that characterize high-performance motorsport.

Motor racing is a complex sport, characterized by high speed, multiple simultaneous tasks, and long races without breaks, generating intense demands on the body and mind of the drivers (Potkanowicz; Mendel, 2013). Robazza and Bortoli (2015) highlight that these factors expose the driver to high levels of physical and emotional stress, making emotional regulation an essential skill for preventing accidents and maintaining competitive performance.

From a physiological standpoint, the authors highlight the constant exposure to gravitational force (G-force) and thermal stress. G-force demands high physical conditioning, being crucial for protecting the athlete in impact situations. Thermal stress, resulting from high temperatures in the cockpit, leads to progressive dehydration during the race, reducing the pilot's physical performance and mental endurance.

In the psychological field, factors such as anxiety, anticipation, and cognitive load are highlighted, all directly influencing decision-making and emotional control (Robazza; Bortoli, 2015). Cozac and Cozac (2024) deepen this analysis by presenting ten essential competencies for the pilot: self-awareness, self-management, motivation, empathy, social skills, cognition, emotion, sensation, perception, and intrapersonal intelligence. The latter allows the athlete to build a solid self-image, which serves as a basis for their sporting performance and overall well-being. In addition to the intrapersonal dimension, the authors also point out the importance of interpersonal intelligence, fundamental for establishing positive bonds with the technical team and the competitive environment. The construction of healthy relationships favors group cohesion and satisfaction in the work context, which directly impacts results (Cozac; Cozac, 2024).

From a technical standpoint, two essential psychological tools stand out: visualization and flow. Visualization contributes to familiarization with the mental and neuromotor processes associated with competition, promoting self-confidence, emotional control, and even the relief of pain resulting from physical exertion. The state of flow, characterized by the fusion between driver and car, reflects the internal balance that allows the athlete to operate efficiently, immersed in the present, with a high degree of concentration and automatic performance (Cozac; Cozac, 2024).

Given this, we highlight the importance of multi-and interdisciplinary work involving psychologists, physical trainers, coaches, and other professionals. Psychological intervention goes beyond emotional control, encompassing the strengthening of motivation, resilience, and enjoyment of sports practice (Weinberg; Gould, 2017). Although motor racing is an individual sport in its execution, it is supported by collective structures – teams, federations, sponsors – that demand synchronicity, clarity of objectives, and emotional balance in the face of constant pressure (Samulski, 2009).

Finally, the presence of a psychologist is essential for optimizing performance and promoting mental health, especially in an environment with little contact with a support network, exhausting work schedules, and a high risk of accidents. In this sense, psychology plays a preventive and educational role, with the potential to positively impact both the careers and personal lives of pilots (Colagrai *et al.*, 2024).

Axis 2. Before the track

The second axis, "Before the Track," brings together studies that address the cognitive, neurological, and social factors that precede the drivers' performance in races. These elements involve training, neurocognitive development, interpersonal relationships, and team dynamics fundamental aspects for high-demand athletic performance, such as in motorsports.

Based on a study conducted by Lappi (2015), it was possible to compare the brain activity of two distinct groups: drivers with experience in urban traffic and racing drivers. Both groups visualized driving a Formula 1 car on an official circuit while undergoing neuroimaging evaluation. The results showed broader and more synchronized activation in areas of the prefrontal cortex, cerebellum, caudate nucleus, posterior parietal cortex, and anterior cingulate cortex in the drivers. Furthermore, the results showed greater brain density in structures such as the thalamus, basal ganglia,

frontal and precentral cortex, with variations associated with the level of success in their sports career (Lappi, 2015, 2018).

These findings reinforce the idea that the brains of elite athletes, such as pilots, adapt to continuous training stimuli, demonstrating neuroplasticity processes (Rodrigues, 2022). The development of these refined cognitive skills is the result of deliberate practice, that is, intentional, structured, and repetitive exercises focused on continuous improvement. In a second study, Lappi (2018) describes this type of training based on four elements: task structuring by the coach, focus on performance improvement, detailed feedback, and systematic repetition. The author connects this process to chunking. The theory states that, in highly complex environments, segmented knowledge internalized through repetition is fundamental for automated performance. Such practices, aligned with the concept of specialization described by Ericsson *et al.* (1993 apud Rodrigues, 2022), indicate that approximately 10,000 hours of practice are necessary to achieve excellence in a skill, a number confirmed by reports from elite pilots.

Beyond the neurocognitive aspect, the axis encompasses social factors, notably the study by Milne, Coffe and Lavallee (2021), which investigated group cohesion in the racing team environment. Through qualitative monitoring of a rookie driver throughout a season, the authors observed that high levels of social cohesion can, paradoxically, negatively impact athletic performance. Among the problematic factors are: excessive conformity to internal norms, inflexibility of thought, restricted communication, and pressure to reciprocate to the team through performance. The study shows that, despite an initial objective focused on supporting the team's main driver, the demands placed on the rookie changed during the season, generating ambiguity, stress, and insecurity. Even disagreeing with certain orders, the athlete felt compelled to follow them. Such situations can pose a risk to the driver's physical integrity and emotional balance, especially when associated with the desire to "repay" the team's trust (Milne; Coffe; Lavallee, 2021).

These data directly relate to other studies (Cozac, Cozac, 2024; Stewart *et al.*, 2024), which reinforce the importance of healthy relationships and clear communication between drivers and teams. However, Milne's study *et al.* expands the discussion by showing that excessive cohesion can limit critical thinking, reduce the athlete's autonomy, and compromise their safety. In this context, the role of Sports Psychology should encompass not only the driver, but the entire ecosystem in which

they are embedded – especially the group and organizational dynamics that influence their performance and mental health (Silva; Farias, 2023).

In motorsports, this care becomes even more urgent given the instability of careers, extreme competitiveness, and the scarcity of positions – only twenty places available in Formula 1, for example (Frascarelli, 2010). A driver who does not deliver the expected results can be quickly replaced, which increases anxiety levels and drives risky decisions, especially among young athletes trying to establish themselves in the professional scene (Ribeiro *et al.*, 2018).

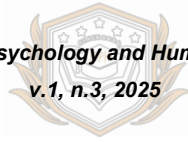
Therefore, psychological work must go beyond the boundaries of individual training, incorporating strategies for collective emotional education, conflict mediation, and the construction of safer and more collaborative environments within teams. The initial resistance from team members, still marked by stigmas and rigid conceptions, represents a challenge, but also an opportunity for Psychology to expand its role in motorsports, promoting not only performance, but also well-being and longevity in the drivers' careers (Silva; Farias, 2023).

Axis 3. Beyond the track

The third axis, Beyond the Track, addresses the instruments and methods used to measure and understand the mental load and psychological patterns of motorsport drivers. This perspective broadens the discussion by considering assessment tools and strategies applicable to performance and mental health, integrating physiological, cognitive, and emotional components.

One of the most relevant studies in this field is that of Filho *et al.* (2015), which used the Multi-Action Plan Model. The Plan (MAP) model was developed to assess how psychological and physiological patterns vary between optimal and suboptimal performance situations. The choice of model was based on the idea that, in high-performance contexts, the athlete's cognitive capacity is overloaded by multiple simultaneous tasks. Thus, a simple and functional model, such as MAP, would allow for more precise and contextualized analyses.

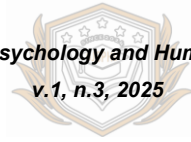
The study was divided into two stages. In the first, participants (ten drivers) were asked to think aloud and describe, step by step, an ideal driving behavior, including motor, cognitive, emotional and environmental components. Among the most mentioned elements, braking and acceleration control after corners stood out as a critical factor for effective driving. This skill relates to visualization, a practice already



known in Sports Psychology, and to the concept of deliberate practice, especially regarding the systematic repetition of specific actions (Lappi, 2018; Cozac; Cozac, 2024). In the second stage, participants completed forty laps in a Formula 1 simulator at the Barcelona circuit. Data analysis indicated that situational awareness is essential for recognizing the chain of events that leads to optimal performance. The authors also suggest the importance of individualized training programs capable of adapting interventions to the specific characteristics of each driver (Filho *et al.*, 2015).

With the same objective of measuring cognitive aspects in motorsports, Brown, Revell and Stanton (2020) developed an instrument called MRLIN (Mental Racing Load Index), based on the combination of two methods: the NASA-TLX (Task Load Index), focused on evaluating mental load in general tasks, and the DALI (Driving Ability Index). Activity The Mental Load Index (MRLIN), specific to driving tasks, represents an attempt to quantify the mental load of drivers during a race, considering factors such as muscle tension, G-force, vibration, temperature, and emotional states. The authors propose that this type of assessment will allow for more precise identification of the elements that compromise or favor performance, enabling personalized adjustments. The individuality of the athletes is emphasized as a determining factor, since each driver responds differently to the physical and mental demands of the sport. Therefore, the use of MRLIN can offer valuable insights for improving performance and monitoring the mental health of athletes (Brown; Revell; Stanton, 2020).

The adoption of these methods can contribute to the development of more effective interventions, such as the early detection of mental overload, the risk of burnout, and signs of demotivation. This allows multidisciplinary teams to adopt preventive and supportive strategies, promoting a balance between performance and well-being (Ribeiro *et al.*, 2018). Furthermore, the MAP itself can serve as a pedagogical and therapeutic tool, assisting in the identification of successful mental patterns and the formulation of specific action plans based on the individual characteristics of each driver. With this, it is possible to develop programs that integrate technique, driving style, and emotional aspects, breaking down complex tasks into simpler and more manageable parts, optimizing learning and execution (Filho *et al.*, 2015).



In summary, the studies presented in this section highlight the relevance of measuring mental workload and performance awareness as key strategies for improving performance and promoting psychological health in motorsports.

4. FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

This study aimed to understand how Sports Psychology is integrated into the context of contemporary motorsports, based on a narrative literature review. The analysis of the materials revealed that several psychological, cognitive, physical, and emotional factors directly influence the performance and trajectory of drivers. Concepts such as group cohesion, deliberate practice, the Multiple Action Plan Model, visualization techniques, and flow state are shown to be fundamental in the training and performance of these athletes.

Although the reviewed works offer relevant contributions to the field, including the possibility of application in other sports, the scarcity of systematic studies on the subject is evident, especially regarding the mental health of drivers. The absence of publications in Portuguese is also striking, particularly considering the importance of motorsport in Brazil, a country that has produced idols like Ayrton Senna and that annually generates billions of reais with international events such as the Formula 1 Grand Prix in São Paulo.

The limited access to full texts and the predominance of materials in other languages demonstrate significant barriers to the dissemination of scientific knowledge in this area. Furthermore, it is noteworthy that none of the publications identified here directly and thoroughly addressed the emotional and psychological impacts caused by factors such as the high risk of accidents, intense media exposure, contractual instability, and pressure for results.

In this context, it is crucial to emphasize the need to expand the role and visibility of Sports Psychology in motorsports. The specificities of this sport, which involve everything from sophisticated neurological demands to complex interpersonal relationships within teams, offer fertile ground for integrated and evidence-based psychological interventions. It is therefore necessary to foster accessible and contextualized scientific production that underpins professional practices focused on care, prevention of mental disorders, and the promotion of healthy performance. Sports Psychology plays a strategic role not only in the development of performance

enhancement techniques, but mainly in the promotion and maintenance of athletes' mental health, ensuring that high performance is not dissociated from well-being.

Therefore, this study reinforces the importance of strengthening the dialogue between Psychology and motorsports, promoting applied research, policies for the inclusion of psychologists in technical teams, and the appreciation of this field as an essential pillar in the training and support of elite athletes. It represents an investment in athletic performance, dignity, and the integrity of the individuals who drive this universe of speed and pressure.

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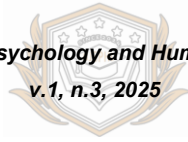
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