

the beeps gets progressively shorter, which not only challenges physical fitness, it also tests a driver's resolve.

The classroom sessions on the first day focused on teamwork. The drivers were split into small groups and asked to build a totem pole from a limited selection of materials. Then they decorated the totem with drawings and images from magazines before presenting their effort to the coaches and explaining how the totem pole reflected their brand values as a team.

The goal wasn't so much to produce an impressive result – none of the drivers is likely become an artist – but to examine the thinking processes in play. The teams were asked to elect a leader to manage the project, and noting how effectively the team members interacted as they worked towards a shared objective gave a fascinating insight into how they would behave as part of a motor sport organisation.

As Andrea Bate pointed out: "Even some of the exercises that seemed a bit silly at first clearly had a serious purpose. It made you really think about what you were doing, which was the aim."

Robert Reid, Wurz's fellow performance manager, was impressed by the level of preparation they all put in. "For the most part they knew exactly what we were looking for," he said. "They had done a lot of research on the Academy and the work of the FIA Institute, and were eager to impress. Excellence is all about going the extra mile, and this is what they were all trying to do."

The driving element became more intense from the second day, when the drivers were handed the keys to race-prepared BMW M3s capable of putting down more than 300bhp. At that point, as Wurz explained, the emphasis shifted towards performance.

The key to good performance, in both racing and rallying, is smoothness and conservation of momentum, which is why the coaches paid particular attention to measuring entry and exit speeds through corners. To assess how well the drivers could maintain momentum, they also had to complete a lap using only top gear.

Another important attribute is consistency, and to test this the drivers had to run a series of laps within 0.5 seconds of their average time, without being able to refer to their speedometer and rev counter.

Some drivers, particularly those used to front-wheel drive cars or rally stages, had never done anything like this, but their ability to adapt to unforeseen circumstances formed part of their assessment.

Not only that, they had to explain their experiences afterwards: giving clear feedback to engineers and team members is a vital part of the job of being a race driver.

But the closest personal scrutiny came in the one-to-one interviews. For 25 minutes – an eternity if you're on the receiving end – the drivers were peppered with questions ranging from their thoughts on the Formula One World Championship to their views on road safety. The answers were frequently revealing and unexpected. The scope embraced both attitudes and opinions, as one of the key judgments the coaches had to make was who

would benefit the most from an Academy place – or their 'trainability', as Robert Reid neatly put it.

What is harder to train for is driver psychology: the right mental outlook mostly concerns personality and upbringing. A determination never to give up is obviously a valuable attribute, but drivers also need to be capable of dealing with several pieces of information at once, such as processing and recalling data rapidly. Their psychology is key to how they approach this.

If one concept encapsulates the modern racing driver it's that he or she must be an able multi-tasker – which is why the Academy assessment focuses on such a wide variety of skills. One of the easiest ways to assess this is in the classroom with a computer. Drivers were therefore set a series of tasks to complete simultaneously as a computer tracked their performance. A separate computer exercise then tested their memory and anticipation.


But still, nothing can replicate actual competition, and in the final day's pursuit race the drivers went head-to-head. The itinerary was simple: practice and qualifying followed by a knockout competition for the top 16. In the final, the fastest qualifier was pitched against the ninth quickest; second fastest versus tenth down to eighth versus 16th. Starting alongside each other, one driver would take the quick outside track while the other took the twisting inner part, then they swapped halfway through to complete two laps.

From then on it was pure and simple: the winner went on, the loser went out. This arrangement produced a final shoot-out between rally driver Craig Breen and race driver Michael Klitgaard Christensen. Breen won this race of future champions, which has marked him as one to watch during the 2012 Academy.

Armed with the data, their analysis and the results from four days, the judges – Reid, Wurz, FIA Institute director general Richard Woods and FIA Institute director of programmes Quentin Crombie – then had to decide on the final 18.

Richard Woods said: "This selection event has demonstrated the breadth of young driving talent that exists worldwide. We're delighted to be able to help develop that talent further and in the right way, with the focus being not just on performance, but also safety and excellence."

Over the next year, the 18 drivers will attend a series of workshops covering all aspects of driver performance and safety. The driving elements will include the development of technical skills, safety training, attitudes and awareness. The human performance aspect will feature physiology, psychology, nutrition, media skills and career management.

As drivers who have been through the first year of the Academy, such as newly crowned Intercontinental Rally Challenge champion Andreas Mikkelsen and Team Lotus F1 test driver Alexander Rossi, have shown, it's the best possible preparation for a career at the top of international motor sport. 

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