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Quitting the fast lane can do good

Watching those teams of men down in the bay, rushing to service the cars in that emergency atmosphere, desperate to clip seconds off their re-fuelling and tyre-changing, reminded me of every computer crash I had ever experienced

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No, I wasn't here for the first Abu Dhabi Grand Prix, but I'd watched some of the preparations down at the Yas Marina, and was vividly reminded of the day I was invited by a longstanding client, called Colin, to his corporate hospitality event at the UK's big Formula One venue, Silverstone.

I'd never taken much interest in the world of motor-racing before, but by the end of that day, I had identified it as the sport that most reflected the stress of big business. For a start, it was the only sport I'd ever watched that looked rather unhealthy. It seemed to me that a contestant would need to take regular exercise to compensate for the odd mix of physical inertia and acute mental pressure of life on the track.

The furious sense of competition seemed to me rather excessive — the idea that if you didn't finish up there in the first three, you were more-or-less in disgrace. (It didn't need a stress expert to note how much dangerous pressure that would set up.) The split-second overtaking and cornering techniques were obviously non-stop tension. And although you expect trophy-winners to let-off a bit of steam, I could see how those hysterical celebration rituals would increase the stress further still.

Sense of crisis

But it was the pit-stops that really concerned me. Watching those teams of men down in the bay, rushing to service the cars in that emergency atmosphere, desperate to clip seconds off their re-fuelling and tyre-changing, reminded me of every computer crash I had ever experienced — the automatic sense of crisis, the feeling that every second counts, and super-human efforts being made, just to restore the normal state of things.

Colin was an old friend of one of the contestants, Steve, who had not driven particularly well that day, and was clearly not happy about it. Behind the polite conversation, I could detect a smouldering resentment in Steve. A few minutes' dialogue revealed that he had been trying to win this particular event for years, with no success. He had never held up that coveted trophy, to the roar of the crowd. And he wasn't getting any younger.

Listening to Steve, and discreetly studying his body-language and general demeanour, I felt strongly that this was a man who would soon be needing his own personal 'pit-stop repair session'.

So I wasn't too surprised to hear from Colin, the following year, that Steve had failed his insurance medical and would not be allowed on the track. I felt that this was a deeply troubled man who ought to have stress counselling, and after some persuading, he

agreed to it.

I told him that maybe he should consider making a clean break from the whole stressful atmosphere of the motor-racing world, and re-invent himself in another field altogether. He is now a part-time tourist guide in a small city that he knows well, and a partner in a firm that supplies specialist equipment — not to race-tracks but to dairies. Colin tells me he's a new man.

Tarmac truths

Motor-racing is an unusual mix of physical inertia and mental stress

The traditional track-side entertainment is liable to heighten pressure

Those who don't feel they're winning should break clean away from it.