

Every race driver, whether club-level or professional, knows the key to performance isn't just how fast you drive — it's how well you prepare before you even hit the track. Behind every lightning lap is a carefully crafted **pre-session routine** that manages nerves, sharpens focus, and primes the body. That routine isn't guesswork; it's a fixed preparation routine tuned to hit the sweet spot of the mind-body connection. In this post, we'll break down how you can build your own 4 step pre-event checklist, inspired by driving pros and backed by science.

The Science of Performance: Understanding Arousal and Focus

Before diving into the checklist, it's important to understand some core ideas around arousal and attention that drivers intuitively master:

The Inverted-U Arousal Curve and Performance Band

Performance depends heavily on how your arousal (or alertness/stress) level is tuned. Imagine a graph shaped like an upside-down "U." At low arousal, performance is sluggish — too relaxed and you lose sharpness. At very high arousal, performance falls off again — too stressed and you make mistakes. The best zone lies in the middle, the "performance band."

Drivers train to use *arousal as fuel*, not as a distraction. The goal is to hit and stay in this optimal zone right before and during the event.

Pre-Session Routine as Working-Memory Management

Your brain's working memory is limited — trying to juggle nerves, tactics, track details, and worries all at once overloads it. A fixed preparation routine acts like a mental "checklist" to organise thoughts and automate process cues, freeing cognitive bandwidth for the task ahead.

Think of it as guarding a precious workspace — clearing away clutter so you can focus fully on driving.

Extended-Exhale Breathing: A Quick Physiological Shift

Physiologically, controlling your breath is one of the fastest ways to shift your arousal state. Extended-exhale breathing (e.g., a four-second inhale followed by a six-second exhale) activates the parasympathetic nervous system, calming the fight-or-flight response.

This isn't vague "just breathe" advice. It's a precise tool drivers use to tap the goldilocks zone of <https://www.motorsportweek.com/2026/08/10/nerves-at-200mph-how-racing-drivers-manage-anxiety-and-focus/> arousal quickly before the session starts.



External Process-Focused Attention vs Outcome Focus

Where you put your attention affects performance. An **external process-focused** mindset — focusing on the next gear change, the feel of the wheel, or the exact braking point — leads to better results than an **outcome focus** (like obsessing over beating your personal best or finishing position).

Leaning into your process cues in the pre-event routine keeps you present and adaptable.

Building Your 4 Step Pre-Event Checklist

Now that you grasp why preparation matters, here's how to craft a practical 4 step checklist to prime your mind and body like the pros.

1. Step 1: Confirm Your Fixed Preparation Routine

A fixed routine means doing the same set of actions in the same order every time before an event. This consistency builds trust in your process and calms performance nerves. It removes uncertainty by automating the “what’s next” decisions at a critical moment.

Action points:

- Write down a step-by-step checklist well in advance, including simple things (e.g., gear check, helmet fit) through to mental cues (e.g., visualising smooth corner exits).
- Test and practice it repeatedly during training and smaller events to build muscle memory.
- Keep it tightly focused on essentials — simplicity trumps complexity under time pressure.

This is your mental warm-up. Like a stopwatch habit, the precision timing and sequence anchor your attention.

2. Step 2: Use Extended Exhale Breathing for Quick Regulation

Exactly two minutes before you're due to go, start a focused breathing exercise. This isn't fluff; according to GOV.UK guidance on stress management, controlling breath rhythm with prolonged exhales can lower physiological stress markers quickly.

How to do it:

- Inhale gently through your nose for 4 seconds.
- Exhale slowly through your mouth for 6 seconds, feeling your ribcage expand as you lengthen the breath out.
- Repeat for 4-5 cycles or until you feel your heart rate slow.

This primes your nervous system to stay calm yet alert — essential when you need arousal as functional fuel.

3. Step 3: Activate External Process-Focused Attention

As your breath settles, shift your attention from “What if I mess up?” to “What’s my next precise action?” For example, think through the feel of clutch release timing or the sound of the engine at shift points.

Why? Because:

- Focusing on process cues narrows your working memory to productive elements.
- It reduces distracting outcome worries and catastrophic “what if” thoughts.
- It helps your brain execute learned motor patterns smoothly.

Imagine yourself stepping through the sequence that needs doing next, like a rehearsed mini-script playing silently in your head.

4. Step 4: Final Practical Checks and Social Sharing for Mental Closure

Conclude your prep by ticking off physical checks — seat belt, helmet, radio—and mentally anchor your readiness. This step ensures nothing critical is missed while maintaining your calm.

Bonus: Share your prep mindset on social platforms like Facebook, Twitter/X, Reddit, LinkedIn, or even Pinterest. Posting your ritual or prepping thoughts connects you with a like-minded community and reinforces accountability.

Sharing isn’t just showing off — it creates external focus and binding accountability, which many drivers find surprisingly grounding.

Putting It All Together: Sample Pre-Event Checklist

Step Action Purpose / Benefit 1. Fixed Preparation Routine

- Seat/belt/helmet fitting
- Check mirrors/gear
- Visualise smooth corner exits

Automates process cues; reduces uncertainty; builds trust in routine 2. Extended Exhale Breathing (2 minutes before)

- Inhale 4 sec
- Exhale 6 sec
- Repeat 4-5 times

Regulates physiological arousal; calms nervous system 3. External Process-Focused Attention

- Focus on next shift/clutch point
- Rehearse motor cues silently

- Tighten helmet straps
- Confirm radio comms
- Post preparation thoughts online

Ensures physical readiness; builds external accountability and confidence

Final Thoughts: Approach Your Pre-Event Routine Like a Pro

Building and sticking to a 4 step pre-event checklist is about much more than ticking boxes. It's about crafting a mental and physical ritual that governs your arousal level and focus, turning anxiety into actionable fuel, and clearing space for your best performance.

Forget vague "just breathe" or miracle hacks. The routine is your personal toolkit, honed through repetition and reflection, grounded in science, and finely tuned for the race day pressure cooker. Next time you're waiting on the grid or moments before a track day, ask yourself: *What will you do in the two minutes before it starts?* Your fixed preparation routine and extended exhale breathing could be your ultimate lap timer.



Ready to try? Start building today — your future self on track will thank you.

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