

Improve your Performance with Sports Psychology

By Doug Payne

What separates equestrians from other athletes is the emphasis on the partnership between horse and rider. The equestrian, like other athletes, is not only undergoing physical training and mental preparation, she is simultaneously building and molding the physical and psychological components of her horse. When you consider the unpredictable behavior inherent in animals, certainly the fear/flight instinct in horses, along with unexpected occurrences in the environment, you may understand why sports psychology might enhance equestrian performance.

For any performance rider, whether it's dressage, hunter/jumpers, polo or eventing, she devotes attention to detail and expands limitless energy and discipline toward her sport. Have you ever watched an equestrian event, and thought, "Wow that's such a nice horse, it must be nice to get to ride such a talented animal. If only I had the money and luck to find such a horse, I could do just as well.?" I believe "great horses are made, not born." Financial backing will open up the possibilities with regards to finding and purchasing the 'right' horse. But without proper training, that 'right' horse will soon be the 'wrong' one. Likewise, great riders are made, not born.

In addition, as a rider, every time you ride your horse, you are training him. His good or bad behaviors are being changed. The goal in training is to produce a reliable performer. Your horse is not going to train itself; the reins are in your hands; you can make it happen! The first step involves attitude. That is the essence of sports psychology, whether you are playing tennis, swimming or driving race cars. The obvious difference is that equestrians are working with a large animal which reacts to the environment and is affected by everything the rider does. In addition, the horse affects the rider.

I am going to present two sets of training tips. The first group describes the necessary attitude to adopt in responding to your horse for successful outcomes in training. The second set focuses solely on the rider's mental preparation.

PERFORMANCE STEPS FOR YOUR HORSE

1. Accept Fate. Things can happen that are out of your control. These setbacks are not your fault and they aren't your horse's fault either. That deer will jump out of the woods in front of you, the horse is going to get scared



and you might fall off...get back on! I was in a dressage ring a few years back, and a ream of paper took flight and attacked my horse. Frustrating? Of course, but I couldn't blame my horse for spooking and becoming upset. It's going to happen, so move on. As a proficient rider, your goal should be to minimize the effect the event had on your horse's confidence and trust. This will only happen if you react in a calm, confident fashion. Animals will always be set at ease if you show them the way. Reassure

them, but don't dwell on the event. Quickly move on as if nothing has happened, put them to work, give them a task which will require their attention. They will soon forget that they were attacked; it might take a while the first time around, but soon enough your recovery period will diminish to a point where the spook will become nothing more than a blip in a stride rather than the unraveling of your ride. If you're looking to train a predictable horse, you have to be as consistent as possible.

2. "Keep it simple, Stupid." You're the smart one in the relationship, right? I sure hope so! I find that people often over-think problems they encounter. Remember, as much as we'd like to ascribe human traits to horses, they are simple creatures. Everything you do needs to be a logical, sequential set of exercises that arrives at your ultimate goal.

3. Raise your expectations. It's very easy to come up with 10,000 reasons why your horse isn't performing to his potential. About 9,997 of those excuses are just that, excuses without solid backing. You have to treat your horse like the horse you want him to be. Ninety-nine percent of horses are born to please. They want to do things right, and they want to please. Make it possible

Above: Doug and Running Order at Boekelo, The Netherlands.

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for them to do just that. Ask for more consistency and higher quality and that will soon become the norm. Then raise the expectations again! Don't get caught up in

thinking, “he’s young and inexperienced,” or “he’s never seen this before,” or “he used to race, drive, was ridden by a poor rider, mistreated, etc....” You don’t have control of where he’s been, but you certainly have control of the future, so change it!

RIDER’S MENTAL PREPARATION

As if horses weren’t enough to deal with, we all have the distinct disadvantage of dealing with our own psyche. Often, we become the obstacle to our success. Libraries are full of sports psychology books, and I’ve included my favorites at the end of the article. Whether you call it positive thinking, peak performance, in the zone or the right attitude, training your mind is as important a discipline as toning muscles. Follow these steps to become the best rider you can be.

1. Ride for the right reasons. As I travel across the country, I see this common problem across disciplines and geography. To become the best you can be, you have to have an intrinsic drive to become better at the sport. Like the free refills at your favorite restaurant, your reserves are never empty. No one in any sport will reach the pinnacle of their potential if their motivation is due to some external cause. Extrinsic motivation will fuel your desire in the short term, but in a time of need, your tank of energy will soon be empty. Without that limitless thirst, you might as well move on to other interests. This is especially true in equestrian sports. If you are peer-pressured into playing tennis, the worst that might happen is that you will get a work out and won’t enjoy yourself. It’s a rare event that your tennis racquet goes rogue, flies out of your hand and lands you in a grove of trees with broken limbs or worse. Then, during your arduous rehab, your racquet drains your bank account until you can find it a suitable owner.

2. Find a positive outlet for your nerves. Nervous energy can be debilitating or it can elevate your senses

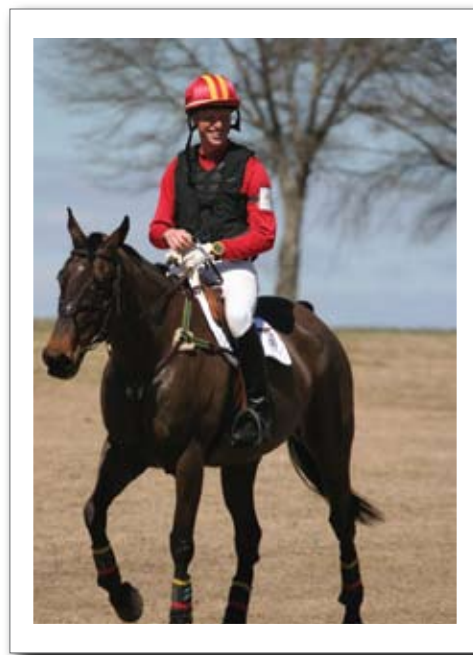
and allow for a higher performance. Countless outlets are detailed in books. Find the tools that work best for you. Those that I’ve found most effective are:

Stare at a point in space to detach from a stressful situation. Just before entering the ring, the start box or upon the first cry of the hounds signifying your initial run, take a moment to stare off into space. Find something off in the distance, and give yourself the time to realize that this overwhelming situation you’ve found yourself in is just a transient moment. You are just a small speck on this planet. The entire world is still revolving.

Deep breathing. Count your breaths as you inhale and exhale—one, and two, up to ten. Repeat until you feel a gentle relaxation.

Visualize positive outcomes. I’ve found visualization is a key element of peak performance. Think of the largest venue where you might be most nervous. Every day when practicing, visualize riding in that venue. The trick with this one, is the day that you actually arrive at that very venue, visualize that you are there, don’t just say, well I’m here. This way every competitive arena or situation that causes you the most angst is now the same. Constancy is key to a calm, confident performance.

3. Process-oriented thinking. This might be the most important of the bunch. Think of your performance as a series of benchmarks that are not results based. The last thing you need to be thinking about in your last round is the fact that you must have a clean round without time or you need to score a goal in the last 15



seconds of the game to win. Think about your performance as a series of steps. Evaluate your results not as your final placing, but in the show jumping example that you had a balanced canter at an appropriate speed and

Above pictures: Doug competing Happy Valley.

DOUG'S READING LIST:

Finding Your Zone: Ten Core Lessons for Achieving Peak Performance in Sports and Life, by Michael Lardon (Perigee Trade, 2008).

The Art of Learning: An Inner Journey to Optimal Performance, by Josh Waitzkin (Free Press, 2008).

The Inner Game of Tennis: The Classic Guide to the Mental Side of Peak Performance, by W. Timothy Gallwey (Random House, 1997).


line to every jump. If you accomplished this at 10 of the 12 jumps today and only 9 of the 12 yesterday, you're on the right track. The results will come. You'll win when you get 12 out of 12.

4. Build confidence. You need to continuously push yourself to elevate your performance. Do so in a progressive fashion. Don't fall victim to peer pressure and over face you or your horse. Confidence can initially be fragile, so make sure you have positive experiences! The other part of this equation that is often overlooked: surround yourself with very positive people who are preferably better than you. You will soon rise to their level. Remember that the best riders are never content; they are constantly working toward perfection in order to stay ahead of the competition. I've developed a composite rider in my mind—someone with the best

attributes of many top riders from multiple disciplines—and I emulate that imaginary person.


5. Perform when it counts. Simulate your competitive arena at home, and get out into the big world to compete for real. There is no substitute for experience. Take an analytical approach to your failures. They're going to happen, expect them and learn from them.

In essence, relax and stay positive. Try not to judge yourself. Instead, maintain "a work in progress" attitude, and it will trickle down to your horse. Remember two things: anything worth doing is worth doing well, and it requires continuous practice.

Check back frequently with your benchmarks. And don't forget to enjoy the process. If you're so focused on the goal and don't enjoy the ride, you have forgotten why you are doing this in the first place! 

About Doug Payne: An upper level eventer who runs his own training facility in Gladstone, NJ, Doug is an ICP Certified instructor, USEF Judge and Technical Delegate. He recently produced "The Rider's Eye," a training video with Olympic Silver Medalist, author and coach, Jimmy Wofford.



 Photos courtesy Doug Payne, except above by Maylen Pierce

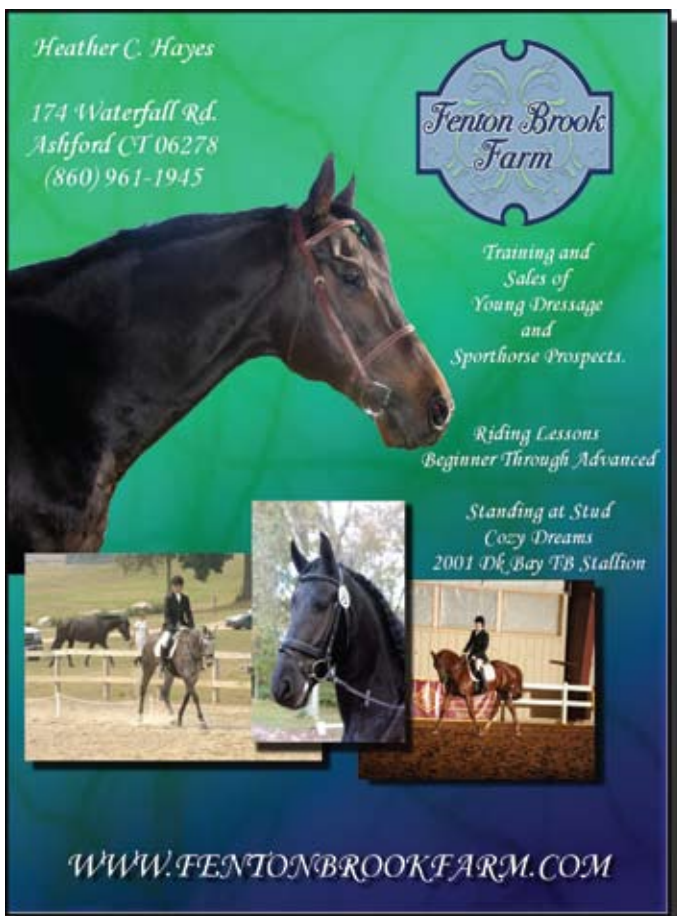
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