



SPORTS PSYCHOLOGY

USING THE POWER OF THE MIND IN COMPETITIVE EQUESTRIAN SPORT

By Davina Ray

MENTAL STRENGTH IS ALMOST EVERYTHING; AND SUCCESS AT ANY LEVEL IS MOSTLY DEPENDENT ON ATTITUDE. THEY SAY 'ATTITUDE IS EVERYTHING'.

THEN, THE QUESTION HAS TO BE ASKED WHY SO MANY ATHLETES ONLY FOCUS ON THEIR PHYSICAL ASPECTS, TECHNICAL SKILLS AND FITNESS. WHY IS IT THAT SO MANY TALENTED RIDERS CONTINUE TO IGNORE THE IMPACT OF PSYCHOLOGICAL AND EMOTIONAL HEALTH TO GIVE THEIR SPORT 100%? IN EQUESTRIAN SPORT, ONE CAN BE THE MOST TALENTED RIDER, ON THE MOST CAPABLE HORSE, BUT EVEN WITH THE MOST REFINED TECHNICAL SKILLS AND THE BEST PHYSICAL FITNESS, YOU WILL BE HINDERED IN THE SEARCH FOR PERFECTION IF YOU SUFFER FROM LOW SELF-BELIEF, LACK OF CONFIDENCE OR OTHER EMOTIONAL ISSUES. INDEED, YOUR BATTLE WITHIN MAY DECIDE THE OUTCOME OF YOUR PERFORMANCE. OFTEN, THE THING THAT STOPS ONE FROM PERFORMING AT HIS BEST IN SPITE OF MONTHS OF PRACTICE AND PREPARATION IS UNSEEN AND INVISIBLE – IT IS THE POWER OF THE PSYCHE.



Photo by Cymon Taylor

The field of sports and performance psychology comprises instructing athletes, teams, coaches, trainers, parents, and other agents, on the psychological aspects of their sport. It involves assessment and therapeutic strategies to enhance an athlete's performance and personal growth. Performance psychology may be successfully applied to the world of sport, as well as entertainment. The eventual goal is to achieve optimum performance and enjoyment through the use of psychological skills such as arousal regulation, imagery, goal setting, positive self-talk, and leadership skills with your horse, guided visualisation, overcoming past traumas, and working through fears. Sports psychology may be applied to any sport, but equestrian sport is a little different – it is not just about the rider, but also the horse—the two are a team, a partnership. No matter how much you practice, your horse is never going to visualise the stadium jumping or dressage you have gone over yourself. And coaching techniques that apply the 'one size fits all' approach do not work, because each rider and horse

are different.

The psychological variables that are paramount for riders include:

MENTAL TOUGHNESS: Mentally tough athletes have 4 characteristics – a strong confidence in their own ability to perform a consistent internal motivation to be successful, the ability to focus thoughts and actions without distraction, and maintaining composure under pressure.

SPORT CONFIDENCE: A belief in their self-efficacy and how they will use a technique successfully; for example, 'I will be able to jump the high fence', instead of 'I think I will have a good show today', which is general confidence. Efficacy is related to specific tasks.

AROUSAL: The full activation of one's physical and mental capacities. The rider's perception of arousal as either good or bad is related to performance.

MOTIVATION: The will to perform a task, and the reasons behind it.

Peak performance, therefore needs control of effort, awareness of the self in every area, self-programming, visualisation and cognitive skills. A rider performing at his peak level has learned and mastered these and knows how to apply them in different situations; he can also alter these techniques to adapt them in new and unusual circumstances.

Coaches and trainers may also benefit from sports and performance psychology sessions by creating a more conducive atmosphere for athletes. This is done by enhancing the motivational climate in which to train riders. The motivational climate consists of the factors that influence a person's goals. The two main motivational environments coaches can help create are task-oriented and ego-oriented. Task-oriented motivation focuses on skill building, skill improvement, mastering the task at hand and learning how to give complete effort. An ego-oriented motivation approach deals more with demonstrating competition, superior ability, and showmanship (i.e. other referenced goals). Coaches can

also learn to explore the best ways to teach and lead their athletes, avoiding self-fulfilling prophecies, rewarding and reinforcing behaviour and giving better constructive feedback.

So, what are the methods by which you can be a better rider? There are several, of which we shall discuss the three most important ones in this article. First, it is essential to set realistic goals that you can achieve in consistent steps, provided you already have the necessary abilities, skills and qualities. A sports psychologist would recommend that you set specific performance goals rather than outcome goals. This is because performance goals are easier to control. One cannot usually control the outcome if it depends on external factors or other people, but you do have control over your own actions. Your riding goals should be specific, measurable, written down, time based, difficult but attainable and perhaps also a combination of short and long term visions.

Motor imagery is another method by which an athlete uses multiple senses to create or recreate experiences in one's mind. The more vivid the images are, the more the brain can interpret them as being similar to the actual event; this increases the effectiveness of mental practice with imagery. Good mental imagery uses multiple senses such as sight, smell, kinaesthetic, proper timing, and accurate portrayal of the task. Proper imagery can also help in managing psychological states relevant to performance. This is especially effective a day before an important event.

The third kind of therapeutic intervention in equestrian sport is somatic therapy. This type of therapy integrates the mental, physical, emotional and psychological aspects in every athlete. It does this by helping us become aware of our bodies and the sensations we experience through them. The pains and sensations we have tell us something about what is going on inside us. If, for example, you feel tight in a certain area, it may mean that we are holding onto something traumatic related to that area. In a trauma, we not only carry the memory but also the feelings attached to the negative



Photo by Cymon Taylor

experience. We therefore remember it physically as well. The body also has its own memory of an event and it is expressed through a muscle or tissue contraction or a loss of freely flowing energy in an area which was injured before or traumatised. As a result, some form of physical deregulation stays harboured in the body until it is released. Clients are helped to move to a state of being deregulated to a state of regulation and better balance. Sometimes, an athlete's body can be deregulated symbolically and not associated with a real trauma (i.e. fear, anxiety, and tension).

Other psychological training techniques for peak performance include relaxation therapy, visualisation, mental rehearsal, focusing and positive affirmation, cognitive training exercises, positive affirmation, training negative thoughts, addressing unspoken fear, learning positive self-talk and enhancing pre-performance routines.

If you have been thinking that your most important riding aid is your horse, or the level of your own physical fitness and training, think again.... the most important riding aid at your disposal is your mind and if it is not providing you with the results you wish for, it may be worthwhile to focus on your 'battle within' and emotional state rather than getting distracted with other things. Your training will take on a whole new meaning and dimension. Harnessing the power of the mind in being able to enhance your performance will be one of your most potent tools. 🐾

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