



THE RIDER'S MENTAL FITNESS (PART 1)

By Dr. Mohamed Elsherbini

IN EQUESTRIAN SPORTS WHERE THE HORSE DOES MOST OF THE PHYSICAL WORK, IT IS MENTAL ATTITUDE THAT DEFINES A RIDER'S LIMITS. ALL RIDERS – FROM NOVICE TO ELITE – CAN GREATLY IMPROVE THEIR PERFORMANCE BY ALTERING THEIR MIND ATTITUDE.

MENTAL PREPARATION:

THERE IS OFTEN GREAT RESISTANCE TOWARDS TRAINING THE MIND IN THE RIDING WORLD. MANY RIDERS ARE RELUCTANT TO USE MENTAL PREPARATION TECHNIQUES BECAUSE THERE IS A BELIEF THAT EVERYONE HAS INHERENT MENTAL STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES THAT CANNOT BE CHANGED. THIS IS OBVIOUSLY UNTRUE, SIMPLY THINKING POSITIVELY OR BREATHING MORE EFFICIENTLY CAN HAVE AN IMMEDIATE EFFECT ON THE RIDER'S PERFORMANCE. INCREASINGLY, COACHES ARE BUILDING TIME INTO TRAINING SCHEDULES FOR MENTAL PREPARATION, AND EVEN, HIRING SPORTS PSYCHOLOGISTS TO WORK WITH THEIR RIDERS.

SUCCESSFUL SPORTS PERSONS:

GENERAL FINDINGS SHOW THAT SUCCESSFUL PEOPLE HAVE HIGHER SELF-CONFIDENCE, REPORT FEWER DOUBTS, ARE MORE POSITIVE AND EXPERIENCE IMAGERY MORE LIKELY TO PORTRAY SUCCESSFUL PERFORMANCE, ARE BETTER ABLE TO CONTROL AND UTILISE ANXIETY, AND HAVE HIGH LEVELS OF CONCENTRATION. THEY ARE ALSO MORE PERSISTENT AND PREPARE MORE THOROUGHLY.

COMPONENTS OF MENTAL FITNESS:

1- **Commitment:** it is when the effort and energy are directed to turn goals into reality. It covers such things as ambition, the desire or dream to achieve, persistence to train long and hard, willingness to make sacrifices, and the ability to plan, correct, and take advice.

2- **Confidence:** it is the belief that someone has the abilities or resources to meet the demands of situations he is likely to face. It is also the belief that someone can acquire the necessary competencies to reach his target. It is not something we are born with; it is learned and developed through life.

3- **Control:** it is taking charge of the mental process to create an internal environment that is conducive to performing well. Self-control entails the ability to maintain composure, contain anxiety, stay positive, accept criticism,

4- **Concentration:** it is the ability to direct someone's attention to the relevant cues and maintain his attention for the appropriate amount of time. The two key aspects of concentration are direction and maintenance of attention.

MENTAL FITNESS

↑
COMMITMENT + CONFIDENCE
CONTROL + CONCENTRATION
↑



▲ Steps to Mental Training (Fig. 1)

1- **Awareness:** creating awareness of mental fitness and its role in performance is the starting point to any mental training programme. This can be done with guided reading or seminars and interviews with elite performers.

2- **Assess:** assessing both the sport and the performer at the outset is important to identify the mental fitness components necessary to consistent performance in this sport. **Behaviour** is a good indicator, whether in training or in competitions, to a person's state of mind (Fig. 2). **Affect** means attention to feelings and moods. Taking time to ask your student is important to assess areas that need attention. Fear, anxiety, anger and depression have an impact on performance. **Sensations** of the body may be indicative to mental stress or anxiety as heart rate, breathing, sweating and urinary function. **Imagery** used to the athlete's advantage is a key part of control. An athlete may be imagining previous failure at the coming future while another positive one may be good at imagining success in competitions. **Cognitions** such as thoughts, ideas, opinions and beliefs have a profound effect on all the components of mental fitness. This effect could be classified and simplified by communication between coach and rider. A coach may think that negative comments are motivating the rider to do greater effort, whereas this can have the opposite effect.

Strong Commitment	Poor Commitment
Show enthusiasm	Lack of enthusiasm
Practice diligently	Poor attendance or training
Perform to potential consistency	Giving up when falling behind
Take action	Complaining frequently
Strong Confidence	Poor Confidence
Positive posture	Bored or negative appearance
Take responsibility	Playing defensively or tentatively
Talk about ability not limitations	Talking about limitations
Strong Control	Poor Control
Relaxed, unafraid	Anxious, fearful
Composed under pressure	Losing composure
Consistent performer	Inconsistent after better training
Strong concentration	Poor concentration
Focused on the task	Showing signs of frustration
Unaffected by distraction	Easily distracted

▲ Typical behaviours and their possible significance (Fig. 2)

3- **Planning:** with the information from the assessment, a broad and timed mental training plan can be drawn up, for example:

Strategies to develop commitment:

- General goals.
- Performance profiles.
- Force field analysis.
- Goal-setting.

Strategies to build confidence:

- Examining beliefs.
- Positive self-talk.
- Thought stopping.
- Reframing.
- Affirmations.

Strategies to maintain control:

- Thought control techniques.
- Emotional control (calming techniques, stimulation training).
- Imagery control (relaxation, imagining success).

Strategies to improve concentration:

- Specific goal setting.
- Routines (Pre-competition & competition plans).
- Trigger words.
- Reminders.
- Stimulation training.
- Distraction training.
- Trigger words.
- Reminders.
- Stimulation training.

Distraction training.

4- **Implement:** the ultimate success of any programme is that it leads to improved performance when competing. Mental training is similar to other aspects of training (physical, technical, and tactical). A new strategy of mental training should be introduced slowly and practiced over at training sessions where the environment is not too pressurised. For example, when working on a skill one can work also on practising concentration techniques. Pressure in training can gradually build up and finally the mental strategy can be used in competitive situations.

5- **Re-evaluate:** the essence of continued improvement is to constantly re-evaluate and draw up new plans or build up on the original plan if it is rewarding. The coach should talk with the athlete after competition and ask a number of relevant questions based on BASIC: (behaviour, affect, sensations, imagery and cognitions).

If mental fitness is important to the horse, it is certainly vital to the rider, putting in mind that his mental state will surely affect the horse's mental condition during training and competition. **HT**