

THE RIDER'S MENTAL FITNESS (PART 2)

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IN THE PAST, COACHES WOULD SHOUT SUCH THINGS AS "RELAX" TO THEIR RIDERS DURING A COMPETITION IN AN EFFORT TO IMPROVE THEIR PERFORMANCE. IN REALITY, SUCH COMMANDS DO NOT HAVE THE DESIRED EFFECT, PARTICULARLY IF THE RIDER DOES NOT KNOW HOW TO RESPOND EFFECTIVELY TO THEM.

REDUCING AROUSAL LEVEL:

Arousal is a term used by sports psychologists to describe levels of both physical and emotional alertness or activation in response to a particular situation. Many riders think that the more aroused they are and the more adrenaline they have, the better their performance will be. However, while high arousal levels can increase determination, high adrenaline levels are actually counter-productive; they inhibit clear thinking, feel and physical control.

There are 2 main strategies to relax: 1 is to use mind and imagination to relax muscles by using meditation as a role-playing technique, and the other way is to do the opposite; using muscles to relax the mind by tightening and relaxing the main muscles with focusing on breathing.

INCREASING AROUSAL LEVEL:

When the rider becomes bored or lethargic, it is necessary to increase the level of arousal. Arousal level should increase from dressage to show jumping and even more in cross-country; those types of equestrian disciplines are related to the degree of arousal. If the horse needs to be more engaged, the warm-up should be directed towards arousal. The rider who needs arousal



▲ Believe it or not, if you are not a mentally fit rodeo rider, you would be on the ground in less than 2 seconds

should be surrounded by 1 or 2 people who respect and know the goals of competition. Some riders need to use positive trigger words like "go", "yes", "do it", and "strong".

IMPROVING CONCENTRATION:

Lapses in concentration can undo all the good work that has gone into the rider's training and preparation. It is easy to become distracted, by both external factors such as words from spectators, or internal factors such as thinking about receiving a prize as a rider rides into the ring when he should be thinking about the first exercise or fence.

Another typical internal distraction is thinking about hitting a fence or performing an inaccurate movement, which some riders concentrate on to an extent that they would forget where they should be going next. This may particularly happen during a show jumping round. In training, a rider needs to make it a habit to always think of the next step rather than to look backwards.

Both show jumping and dressage demand fairly short but continuous periods of concentration. The physical presence of the fences in show jumping tends to make the mind concentrate very well. Dressage tests,



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▲ Good mental preparation leads to good concentration during competition, as shown on Marcus Ehning's expression



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▲ Mental fitness is very important for continuous concentration in up to 6 or 7 minute dressage tests, as shown by Andreas Helgstrand

the other hand, do not have such mental props - and since a test is also 2 or 3 times longer than a show jumping round, they make greater demands on concentration. Get into the habit of analysing a test sheet as you would a course of fences: the end of 1 movement being the fence before the start of the next one.

AIMS OF MENTAL PREPARATION:

Mental training can be divided into 6 different areas, each of which trainers can concentrate on. A truly accomplished rider will be proficient in all these areas but it will take time to reach this level of accomplishment just as it takes dedicated training to improve riding skills. The rider should have the following mental characters:

1 - Being steady: being methodical and consistent is essential for the rider to maintain a good relationship with his horse. The rider needs discipline in his training. He should stick to the timetable. His aim should be to work hard, and to be calm but persistent.

2 - Being simple: a good rider will be driven by the need for logic and efficiency. Analysing complicated tasks and breaking these down into smaller parts will make them more manageable, as will defining vague tasks with more precision. The trainer

should test out ideas and teach the rider to learn from his mistakes.

3 - Being positive: the rider should be constructive and optimistic, as well as realise the importance of working with others. He should believe in himself and focus on his abilities, not his shortcomings. The rider should work from his strengths and always think forwards to his next goal.

4 - Being flexible: in order to be the best, the rider should be able to be creative and open minded in his search for improvements. He needs to look for more efficient progressions that will allow him to achieve more, and he must be prepared to think laterally. There should be an aim to find new and better ways of doing things.

5 - Being prepared: the rider should have the ability to plan ahead and to respond to his trainer's plan. From the start, the rider should practise making decisions and taking control. This will enable him to seize opportunities in his competitions. He should learn that while competing, and then he will always make the best of any opportunity he encounters.

6 - Being human: the rider should have respect for himself and others in order to cope with the lapses of competition life. The rider should develop his own

individuality to improve his performance. He should accept life's diversity and unpredictability, and above all, enjoy himself.

ASSESSING THE RIDER'S MENTAL FITNESS:

Teach your rider to ask himself the following questions, if the answers to any of them is yes, it means there would be a need for improvement:

- 1 - Did I lose way in a course or dressage test?
- 2 - Do I become very nervous before competition?
- 3 - Do I become angry after making a mistake?
- 4 - Do I make the same mistake repeatedly?
- 5 - Do I lack confidence in my ability?
- 6 - Do I focus on the negative aspects of riding?
- 7 - Do I find it difficult to get motivated?
- 8 - Do I lose concentration?
- 9 - Do I find it difficult to be disciplined in my weekly training?
- 10 - Do I perform well in training, but badly in competition?

Always remember that for a rider to reach levels of championships, he should be able to exercise and control himself both mentally and physically. **HT**