



THE FOCUS FACTOR:

Mentally Preparing to Compete

BY STEPHANIE LYNN

You are ready to go into the pen. Your horse has warmed up perfectly. The class before yours has lined up and the gate man is calling for your class to enter. As you near the open gate, another horse lopes by, cuts you off, his angry tail swishing across your horse's face. Your horse reacts by raising his head and now you...

What should you do? How do you respond to sudden upsets? Are you thrown off your game or do you take it in stride? Does the very sight of a well-known exhibitor wreak havoc with your mind? Do you walk into the arena full of positive vibes only to curse yourself for dredging up memories of previous problems?

If you have diligently done your homework, including preparing your mental game, you will automatically know how to handle each situation as it occurs. In the example, the best way to handle the problem is to simply calm your horse. Distract him with a quick change of direction, however brief, and give him a pat on the neck. Carry on, no big deal.

The ability to stay on their game is what makes a great rider great. In fact, at the heart of every great ride is relaxed and focused concentration. It is a key ingredient in the ability to make something look so easy that it appears as if anyone could do it. But how exactly does a rider achieve that? What do great riders do that enable them to stay focused in such

a way that even potential disasters turn out favorably? They train their minds.

Everyone has heard the expression "loose lips sink ships." Likewise, loose minds destroy good rides. The biggest cause of poor performance is out of control thinking. Every rider has suffered from out-of-control thinking at some point on their path to the winner's circle. It is the rider who overcomes scattered out of control thinking that becomes successful time and again on horse after horse.

Just as you drill and train to develop your position in the saddle, you must drill to develop and train a tight mind. You will need to learn, understand and practice until you reach a level of natural and automatic performance – just like your riding. To create a competitive tight mind you will need to:

- Develop a vision
- Orchestrate a mental plan
- Rehearse a winning thought process
- Control your thoughts
- Expect it, practice it, do it

Develop a Vision. While you have heard it over and over again in many aspects of your life, you must start with a vision of your perfect ride (or the perfect rider you want to become). Your perfect performance starts with a perfect vision. Your perfect vision should be focused, motivated, strong and confident. Here are some questions you can ask to help create your vision:

- What do you look like?
- How do you act through practice at home, in warm up and in the show ring?
- What do you do on a good day? And on a bad day?
- How focused and aggressive are you in practice? In warm up? In the show ring?

Write down on paper words that describe your ideal vision for showing. Or take a picture of a rider you emulate or a horse in a perfect stop, spin or stance. Hang the picture on your horse's stall. Pin your perfect vision statement to your tack room door or above your saddle where you will see it every time you ride.

Orchestrate a Mental Plan. In Equitation over Fences, riders are tested on their ability to get to the middle of the jumps while maintaining an even hunter pace. Tests take riders through a course of unrelated distances, tight turns and sometimes a change of gait. Judges look for riders who ride with a plan. Riders who sit on top of well-trained horses but are not capable of making good decisions will receive lower scores.

Good plans must be orchestrated. Successful riders use key words to keep them on their plan. Choreographed phrases keep athletes in the zone. The phrases can be technical statements; keep your shoulders back, sit deep in the saddle, count to three before cueing; energy statements; breathe in, breathe out, relax, go for it; or confidence statements; I can do this, I have done this before, this is no big deal.



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Orchestrating a mental plan keeps you in the present not in the past or the future. You must remain in the moment to adapt to conditions that may arise in your ride. Once these verbal cues become automatic, they will carry you through the tough parts of your ride. They allow your mind to be non-thinking or in the zone disallowing the rehashing of old mistakes. No more “here we go again” in the middle of your ride.

Commit to verbal cues and use them in your practice every time. Then take those same words and repeat them in the show pen. Make sure that the words you use are positive, encouraging and build trust. Hear your coach’s words as if they were a little bird sitting on your shoulder.

Rehearse a Winning Thought Process. See yourself as the champion you want to be. The more clarity you bring to your dream ride, the more quickly the vision manifests. Visualize perfection with no limits. Hear the sounds of the announcer,

visualize the arena, feel the buzz and electricity. Notice the taste of your mouth going dry. Watch as the exhibitor in front of you performs their pattern. See yourself in the class through all of your senses. See yourself accomplish your goal.

Use your mental rehearsal to hone the key words you will use for verbal cues. Try them on and see how they sound. Before you go to bed at night, envision your perfect ride. Break down each component and see yourself performing a perfect flying lead change Monday night. On Tuesday night mentally rehearse a perfect spin. On Wednesday imagine yourself sitting perfectly at the extended jog and so on. Once you get to the horse show, find a quiet moment to mentally rehearse your perfect ride.

Research has shown that visualization helps athletes and non-athletes improve their performance. Mental rehearsal should specifically include imagery that focuses on strategy, performance of specific skills, anxiety that arises with

competition, being in control and confident and imagining your goal achievement. You have heard it before; the game is 90 percent mental and 10 percent physical.

Control Your Thoughts. We have met riders who first appeared to be snobby only to realize after competition that they are friendly, helpful and even chatty. But before competition, as part of their preparation, they close their world to only matters of substance. This is a place without dwelling in the past or future what if thoughts.

Allyson had qualified Radar for the Amateur Working Hunter without a lead change. Radar was great over the jump but dropped his lead on a left to right lead change. Good enough to qualify would not be good enough to win at the World Show. Given a choice, Radar landed left. However, Radar was also very scopey. If Allyson stayed focused, Radar would land on the correct lead for the turn ahead. But Allyson had to keep her eyes up and her right shoulder back for Radar to land on the correct lead.

In the chute at the world show, after a quick cry to release the tension Allyson recited “I am going to jump the jump, look up and bring my right shoulder back. Jump the jump, look up and bring my right shoulder back.” I knew she would stay deep in her corners, find the middle of the jumps and get the correct strides in between. Those skills had been practiced to the point of automatic pilot.

Of course, Allyson jumped the jumps, looked up and kept her right shoulder back. Radar landed right for the right turns and left for the left turns and the pair won the class on all five judge’s cards. Allyson’s ability to control her thoughts and mind has led her to success in and out of the show ring.

Expect It, Practice It, Do It. As the horse show or class nears, great riders shift into show mode. Their behavior flows and they act as if on automatic pilot – the exhibitor who appears snobby. The mentally tough rider is doubtless, knows they will succeed and expects to perform their best. Notice I did not say win.

The ability to shift from hoping for a good performance to knowing you will have a good performance is the sign of a mentally prepared rider. Strong riders are not surprised by a great performance; they expect it.

Expect it and you will achieve it. This attitude is what creates the effortlessness seen in great rides. Even if you do not feel it, act it. Fake it if you must. Remember a ride that was especially good. What did it feel like, taste like, smell like?

Go into the arena with that feeling fresh in your mind. Recreate your perfect vision in your performance.

That’s a Wrap. Allyson achieved success by practicing. She choreographed her mental preparation including verbal cues, controlled her thoughts, visualized achievement and rehearsed a winning thought process - all of which fed her confidence bank.

Confidence is not something you can buy. It does not show up on only sunny days nor does it hide on cloudy days. Like everything else that involves horses, it must be trained. Positive reinforcement helps build confidence. Repetition builds confidence. Success builds confidence. Pretending to be confident builds confidence.

Like the perfect body position makes a maneuver easier for your horse to perform, a tight mind creates confidence and consistency. I tell clients if I can see it you have to be able to feel it. Watching a horse approach a transition, judges can see whether you are going to make it miss it. A relaxed yet focused mind allows you to make adjustments as needed not simply react to situations after they occur. An orchestrated mental plan pre-empts negative situations from escalating.

Show day is the day to show your confidence. Judge’s can see confidence shrink with the drop of your eye, the slump of your shoulders or the frown on your face. You have worked hard and practiced hard. You know how much effort you have put into your preparation. Now is the time to let it shine.

Have faith. Without it, doubt will destroy your hard work. Faith prevents self-destructive thoughts keeping you from becoming a crumbling tower of Jell-O in a clutch situation. Good luck. Let it go. And most important have some fun.

ABOUT STEPHANIE LYNN

Professional Horseman, Coach, Trainer and World Champion Stephanie Lynn coached her first World Champion in 1988. She has since coached, trained and shown World and Congress Champions across disciplines. She is a judge for NSBA, AQHA and APHA and has judged world championship shows for each association. Stephanie is the author of *A Lifetime Affair: Lessons Learned Living My Passion* and the recent publication *The Good Rider Series*. The complete series includes *Equitation 101*, *Horsemanship 101* and *Showmanship 101* with each title accompanied by a separate corresponding homework book.



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