



Nerves – How are we supposed to handle them?

Holly Grayton

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Growing up as a rider, I was always fighting my nerves and often wondering if everybody was thinking what I was thinking: ‘Am I doing everything all wrong?’

As a young adult I bought a horse that I could show, and it turned out that even though I was older, I wasn’t any more confident in the show ring, not to mention just jumping this new horse at home.

As it turns out, in my investigation everybody has to deal with their nerves about something, whether it is a fear of falling off, missing a distance, embarrassment, pressure to do well – the list goes on.

If dealing with nerves is a global issue for riders, it would follow that as riders we need to find our own ways to get over these nerves and fulfill our goals. I looked to equestrian friends and asked them how they cope with nerves, and I started reading books about performance, nerves, and getting over fears.

Almost every rider I asked stressed the importance of visualization before entering the show ring. Most like to take time alone, sitting on the far side of the ring by themselves to go over and over the course in their mind’s eye and some even seek privacy in a stall or bathroom to really focus. I came across a recurring thought about visualization from the experts: apparently the human mind can’t tell the difference between doing something and visualizing doing something. This means that if you successfully visualize your upcoming course, when you actually go in the ring to ride the course your mind will feel a sense of familiarity, as though your body has already completed this task. With this said, it seems important to make sure that when you visualize your round, you really picture it going perfectly. If you visualize something negative happening, rewind the tape in your mind, and re-visualize it until the whole round goes smooth, exactly how you would like in real time.

I spoke to several of Alberta and North America’s top riders about their nerves heading into the competition arena.

Alberta’s Lindsay Powell explained her course walking technique to me. ‘I always see people walking the course looking down at the footsteps in front of them...the last thing I want to be *thinking* about out there is what jump is coming next... I need to know that without even thinking about it.’ So Keep your eyes up while you walk.

American Grand Prix rider Kyle King will always walk the course in sections. After the first section of a few jumps, he will take a moment and go over the course in his mind, from the beginning until that point, before moving on to the next section. After a few more jumps, he will again go over the whole course from the beginning to the point at which he has paused, and then proceed with the rest of the course. By the time he is on course, there is an automatic running commentary in his head that he has already said to himself nearly a dozen times.

Mandy Porter has represented the United States at the World Cup Finals. She stresses the importance of learning from past mistakes, but when in the ring it is important to stay in the moment. Hard work, both mental and physical, is so important. ‘Wanting it’ just isn’t enough - the effort has to back up the desire.



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Handling crises and problems will make riders stronger. When on course, no matter what happens at a jump, you can't go back and fix it, you must get back in the zone and 'ride what's in front of you'. She adds 'Never let your horse know you made a mistake!'

Rising talent Ann Knight Karrasch, of California, advises to break up the course into sections, examining what is needed for your particular case in each section. She adds that a top level rider 'needs to have a killer instinct - to be able to find themselves down and out, and be able to dig deep to fight their way back.'

Alberta rider and professional Lynne Stephenson also recommends to break the course down into parts, and to remember exercises you have done at home that can be compared to the sections of the course. Nael Nassar of Egypt, winner of the 2013 \$1 million Zoetis Grand Prix in Saugerties, NY, agrees with Lynne. He told me that watching past successful rounds and re-living them when preparing for a class also gives him the confidence to go in the ring.

Canadian Equestrian Team member Samantha Buirs, of British Columbia, recommended the book 'Finding your Zone', by Dr Michael Lardon. Dr Lardon says that 'in essence, the most effective way to manage difficult emotions and thoughts in competition, or in life, is to develop the ability to slow down when agitated and become conscious of your reaction... It's the over-trying that impedes the realization of our ability.'

Alberta's own international Grand Prix rider Alex Grayton says that in the warm up ring it is very important to have someone on the ground that not only knows what they are talking about with respect to jumping, but that also knows the horses and himself well enough to get everyone in the right frame of mind for competition. He stresses that everyone needs a good ground crew to keep confidence high and emotions level.

It seems like everyone is mostly on the same page about nerves. If you can develop techniques to raise your confidence and control runaway emotions, the skills you already have can shine through. From my own personal experience there are a few things that really make the difference for me to be mentally prepared and to cope with my nerves:

It is so important to have a horse you believe in, and who believes in you. In the end when you are in the ring, it is only you and your horse. If you go in a class and think you both can do it, then you really will. If you don't think you can, something is missing. You need to have a partner in this sport.

Remember to breathe. From a purely physical viewpoint, for your body to work at its highest levels, your brain and muscles need to be getting enough oxygen. Even and steady breathing is so important! I sometimes when I'm especially nervous when I pick up the canter I take a deep breath and the push the air out and make it take all my butterflies with it.

Surround yourself with good people. The people you surround yourself with are supposed to be there to pick you up on bad days, to want you to succeed, and mostly relate with your experiences. Keep friends and



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people around you that really want you to succeed and who understand that sometimes we have bad days but that doesn't define us as human beings.

As you walk into the ring think like Nike - 'Just do it'