



Loosing like a winner

Kaitlyn McAleese

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Losing Like a Winner:
A How-to Guide for Tantrum Throwers, Cry Babies, and Poor Sports.
Kaitlyn McAleese

Sportsmanship is a tricky subject. We all think we know what it means, yet at the same time nobody thinks they're doing it wrong. Whether you've been in the sport for a hot minute or you've dedicated your life to it, you can bet you've called someone a poor sport at one point or another. In fact, I would go as far as to say that how you conduct yourself among your peers is the most important performance you give at a horse show. Everyone has rails and refusals and falls off from time to time, but (thankfully) not everyone throws their stick at the groom or yells at their mother for bringing Dasani instead of SmartWater. Even so, it wasn't until I had the pleasure of working with some truly classy sportsmen as well as the misfortune of standing in the in-gate with an utterly bottom-of-the-barrel sore loser, that I came to understand just how important sportsmanship is to equestrian sports in particular.

The worst of the worst came when I was taking care of a really special equitation horse for a girl that won more than anyone I've ever known. You may think you know where this is going, but let me say first that she practiced more than anyone else, she cleaned her own tack, she said thank you and she legitimately tried, which is not as common as you might think. Rarely did she compete against someone who rode better than she did, but I truly believe that was because she was working harder. However, during a national final that year, this same girl cried through the entire awards presentation when she came second. As in, sponsors were trying to take pictures with her and shower her with gifts and she had her head in her hands *audibly* sobbing. At first I thought it was kind of funny, but it was around the time she threw herself on the floor of the grooming stall wailing into her mother's lap that it stopped being funny and started being horrifying. The day she lost, she did not clean her own tack, she did not go get ice for her horse, and she did not say thank you. However, she did say a half-hearted 'congratulations' to the winner, which was applauded by her parents and trainer as being very sportsmanlike and noble, given that she had *deserved* to win. Maybe she did, but that isn't the part people will remember about that class or that rider. At the very least, it's not the part I will remember. Unfortunately for her, I will only remember her spectacularly bad attitude and the fact that it didn't matter how graciously she won if she couldn't lose like a winner too.

Is sportsmanship about working hard, saying thank you, and congratulating the winner? Yes. Is that all it's about? Absolutely not. As five year olds playing house-league soccer, kids learn you have to shake hands and say 'good game' to the other team whether you win or lose, but I'm not sure they're learning why that's so important. The reason we do that is out of respect for the sport, for everyone on your team, and for everyone playing on the other team as well. In show jumping, it becomes complicated because the list of people on the team is so long. Of course there are the riders, but there are also the horses, trainers, parents, grooms, horse show staff, owners, sponsors, and so many others who are on



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the team too. When that girl cried during the presentations, she was disrespecting the people trying to honor her accomplishment, the rider who had won, her parents who do everything in their power to support her dream, the trainer who was an integral part of all the success she had enjoyed, the groom who cares for and prepares the horse, and of course, the horse himself who owed her nothing and always did his best. In essence, her behavior disrespected the sport to which she and so many others have chosen to dedicate so much time and effort.

At the end of the day, sportsmanship is about being an exemplary person in everything you do and say, but fundamentally it is an appreciation of the fact that to be a sportsman is a privilege and should be treated as such. Riding is hard and losing is harder, but not in the way that true hardship is, and I think that to be a sportsman is to remember that. To be able to wake up everyday playing a game you're passionate about with animals you love and people who feel the same way is a gift. The first time I brought a horse to the ring for a World Cup class, the horse stopped at the water and the rider left the ring on his feet, completely soaked in artificially blue water. Obviously it was disappointing, but what really stuck with me about that day was that on the way out of the ring the rider apologized to *me*. In that moment, I'd never felt more like a part of the team. We'd both been at the show all day, the horse had been flatted, bathed, iced, braided, and pep talked, all for 6 jumps and a big dry cleaning bill. However tomorrow, we would both get to wake up, start again, and spend the whole day doing something we love all over again, and as a nod to that incredible reality he conducted himself with integrity, as only a true sportsman can. If you can do that, I guarantee more people will want to work their hardest for you and as a result, you can get back to practicing winning like a winner, which even the best of sports can agree is the fun part anyway.