How to Peak Your Performance

There’s a little luck involved in getting a great ride when it really counts, but mostly it’s a matter of careful preparation. Experts share their strategies.

BY PATTI SCHOFLER
How fortunate for you if the sun, moon, and stars align such that your most important test—be it a schooling-show series final, a Regional Championship ride, or the World Equestrian Games—is your best ride ever.

Likely, however, the celestial bodies have little to do with it. Producing the “ride of a lifetime” at an important show is one of the most challenging elements of our sport. And like so many things in dressage, attaining peak performance requires a detailed strategic plan.

For this article, we asked two top riders to describe their methods of “peaking” a horse for competition.

**Success Shouldn’t Be a Fluke**

Olympian Adrienne Lyle assesses competition performance according to how consistently her mount works to the best of his capability. The ideal, she says, is when it feels as if the horse’s best performance has become an innate part of him.

“Consistency is the key to a horse peaking. For example, you maybe can get a super passage from him at home, but can you get it consistently in different environments without stress or anxiety?” says Lyle, assistant trainer to fellow Olympian Debbie McDonald at Peggy and Parry Thomas’s River Grove Farm, Sun Valley, ID.

Lyle has spent the last eight years developing a partnership with Peggy Tomas’s 1999 Oldenburg gelding, Wizard (Weltmeyer x Classiker). The pair won the USEF Young Adult “Brentina Cup” Dressage Championship in 2008 and competed as individuals at the 2012 Olympic Games. They started off 2014 with a bang, winning team and individual gold medals at the Wellington (FL) CDIO3* in February (“Heads Up,” April), and are aiming for this year’s Alltech FEI World Equestrian Games in Normandy.

As Lyle explains, peaking means different things for a Grand Prix dressage horse and a young horse. The GP competitor will be assessed according to the movements of the test, whereas “For a young horse, peaking means he is consistently forward, rhythmic, and energetic,” she says.

Here is Heather Mason’s definition: “Peaking is a balance between the horse knowing the movements and being able to perform them with confidence and strength, and yet being rested and fresh enough to perform them with expression.” Mason, who is based at her family’s Flying Change Farm in Lebanon, NJ, is a USEF “S” judge who has trained 13 horses to Grand Prix. She has won many regional and national dressage titles and Adequan/USDF Horse of the Year awards, and she was a US team alternate for the 2011 Pan American Games.

**Planning to Peak**

To have your horse at his best for that important competition calls for long- and short-term mapping of both the competitive steps toward that goal and the training necessary to reach it. The strategizing begins months in advance and may include monthly, weekly, and daily short-term goals, culminating in a plan for the test itself.

Months before your target event, identify the shows you’ll need to attend in order to qualify. Map out a competition calendar; you’ll plan your long- and short-term riding goals around these dates.

Mason’s planning goes like this: She chooses her qualifying shows, then selects one or two “warm-up shows,” depending on how many outings she thinks the horse needs to prep him for the qualifiers. She strives to create a competition schedule that does not stress or tire the horse, she explains.

As part of her plan to build consistency, Lyle focuses on training, not showing, during the off season when she is home in Idaho. During that time, she strives to improve the quality of the gaits and the horse’s ridability.

“For example, I’m looking for suppleness in the trot half-passes. I don’t do the steep Grand Prix half-passes often, and I only add power when I’m closer to show season.”

However, not going full bore doesn’t mean substandard riding, Lyle notes. “I do always, always expect a clear response to an aid. You want that every reaction from your horse is honest and that you don’t need to ride with a lot of strength. You pay attention to the details of whatever you
are doing. You ride every corner, every time. People don’t ride their corners, and then when they get in the test they don’t have their corners down. Each corner, every time, gets bend, balance, and riding forward out of it. Doing your best is being very picky, even if it’s not full power or a full test.”

Even if a horse is solid in his training, he needs the appropriate physical conditioning in order to perform a test to the best of his capability. Mason feels that her horse is at the apex when he is strong enough to do the test well without tiring, either mentally or physically.

“Peaking should not stress the horse. The extra strength training to build to the peak can be taxing, though. The rider needs to monitor the horse carefully and reduce the work if the horse feels tired,” Mason says.

A month or two before the first show of the season, Lyle breaks down each movement in the level to evaluate how to make that movement better, and then she begins to build it up. She starts nit-picking the technical riding of the test movements, and she calculates ways to improve each one to score as many points as possible in the show ring.

Test-riding is another valuable preparatory step. Lyle organizes “dress rehearsal” mock shows for her students, who bathe and braid their horses and don show clothes for a complete run-through of the competitive experience. Her own pre-competition regimen includes riding the test at full power once a week, which she says helps her to figure out when to push, when to back off, and how to prepare for this movement or that corner.

“When I’m in a test, I’m thinking about preparation, not just how to complete a movement,” Lyle says. “When you’re training, ride your movements at specific points, and don’t allow yourself to throw in a circle if something doesn’t work. Put pressure on yourself. Being precise at a letter makes you prepare so that when you get into the ring, it isn’t panic when a movement comes up. You get used to planning, whether you’re riding a three-year-old or a Grand Prix horse. It’s interesting that when you put that little stress on yourself, you see that what you thought you had secured may not be secure, and you find places you need to work on.”

A week or two before a show, Mason discontinues working on any new movements or exercises. It can also be risky to change your training approach that close to competition, she says, even if it’s on the advice of a trainer or clinician.

**Discover the Best Prep Routine for Your Horse**

To reach that peak, both you and your horse need to develop the confidence to compete without anxiety. Part of that confidence comes from solid preparation and good training. The other part comes from getting lots of show miles under your collective belts.

Competing on the jam-packed Florida winter dressage circuit, with shows held every weekend, gets Lyle out of her comfort zone and challenges her skills, she says.

“You can stay at home and train; that’s great. But it’s not the same as going in front of other people and riding on demand,” says Lyle.

Although Lyle and Wizard are world-class competitors with an Olympic Games on their resume, they needed to reacquaint themselves with the show arena before the first big outing in Florida this winter, as Wizard had been out of action for a year with an injury. To test the waters, Lyle started by taking Wizard to a local USEF-level show in January.

“I even hauled to the show grounds a few days before the show to make sure he was okay mentally,” Lyle recalls. “The national show gave me a chance to figure out what worked and what didn’t, and what we needed to work on for the CDI the next weekend. Sometimes you make silly mistakes because you’re not brushed up on being in the show state of mind.”

Only by going to shows, says Lyle, will you learn how your horse behaves at a show and how best to arrange his schedule in the days leading up to the competition. Think about how he goes at home. “Is he best on the last day you ride or the second day you ride? Does he tire by the end of the week, like Wizard does? Wizard is really good the second and third day of the week. The week of a show, I give him Monday and Tuesday off or lightly hack him, school him Wednesday, and show him Thursday and Friday. Then he’s done.”

A few days before the show, says Lyle, your training as good at it will get at the moment, so it’s time to “leave it and trust that you can get it in the ring. That’s when you figure out how to ride what you have. It may still not be as good as you want; but how do you make it look good, keep it flowing, and make it the best it can be without training him the day before a show?”

“Everyone has made the mistake of pushing too hard,” Lyle continues. “It takes discipline to fight your own nerves as you’re thinking, ‘I want to do it again.’ Where I see people making negative effects is schooling for hours prior to the show. They’re stressed, and the horse is a little nervous, and they’ll practice a movement over and over, wanting to make it perfect. When the horse gets to that movement during the test, he’s sore from the work the day before. It’s not a good result.”

Some horses don’t perform as well the day after they’ve
had a day off. When Lyle is showing one of these types, she rides him in the field the day before competition starts so that he can trot and canter around without feeling pressured. “It’s important to preserve their mental state and yet preserve cardio fitness,” she says.

A fresh outlook is important to Mason, as well. “Heavy training the days before a competition won’t work because the horse may be tired. My horses almost always have a light workout the day before competition and a day off two days before. For the big competitions, you need that extra expression. That is where strength and freshness come into play,” she says.

**Build up to the Big Moment**

Lyle’s approach to riding the actual test in competition depends on her evaluation of the horse’s ability to perform the test at that moment in time. She has to ride what she has that day, not what she hopes to have in a future competition, she says.

“It is important to know how to get to your goals little by little,” says Lyle. “Say I’m showing Grand Prix at the beginning of the year, and my horse’s passage is not as strong as it needs to be. For the first test of the year, I’m going to focus on rhythm in passage. I want to feel like it’s ridable. For my next test, I may ask for a little more energy or more height. You build like that. You keep growing in the training, but never to the point where you say, ‘I have to get it today!’ Otherwise you go backward. You’ve stressed the horse, and he has negative thoughts when he goes in the ring.

“Maybe your goal for this show is to really ride your corners and have him really wait for you,” Lyle continues. “Or maybe he spins in his pirouettes. So you keep the pirouettes larger and focus on the ridability and control. Then, when you get nearer to the championships, you can make them a little tighter.”

Planning ahead and focusing on progress little by little—while staying mindful of your horse’s capabilities, strength, energy, and mental state—beat riding full power every day in an attempt to make it happen. And it certainly beats counting on the stars. ▲

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