

## The Inner Game of Dressage

*Sport-psychology principles to help your riding*

By Jennifer O. Bryant

**A**s dressage devotees, we train, train, train: striving to perfect that shoulder-in or our own position in the saddle. That's all well and good, but many of us neglect to train an equally important part of the equestrian equation: our brains.



MIND POWER: Your brain needs training, too

Doubts, fears, and distractions can derail progress as ruthlessly as neglecting to focus on the dressage ABCs. Athletes, performers, and others have known for decades that the right mindset helps them to achieve their goals, but many equestrians are latecomers to the party. Even some of the members of the 2010 US Alltech FEI World Equestrian Games dressage team were new to sport psychology, as the field is known.

Rider and clinical sport psychologist Jenny Susser, PhD, of Huntington, NY, introduced the 2010 USDF convention audience to the subject with her session, "Riding with Confidence: A Mental Approach." Susser is well equipped to discuss the pressures and stresses of athletic performance: A former competitive swimmer, she swam on two national teams and took part in the 1988 US Olympic trials.

Sport psychologists coach their clients in exploring mental barriers to performance and then in developing strategies for improvement. As Susser put it, "I'm a trainer for your mind."

### Developing Confidence

A greenhorn in any pursuit naturally lacks confidence. "Knowledge and understanding are the way to improving performance," Susser said. Whether the subject is dressage or biochemistry, mastery begets confidence.

Susser distinguished between *self-confidence* and *self-concept*. Confidence, she explained, is task-specific: "I know how to ride a half-halt" or "I am a good driver," for example. Self-concept refers to our overall perception of ourselves. Athletes and others may need reminding that one poor performance does not make them losers or lesser people.

Confidence requires a solid foundation and builds over time. It can also erode in the face of setbacks, such as the challenge of moving up to a new level or an injury. That's why Susser calls confidence a continuous work in progress.

That's the first step. Next, said Susser, comes the development of focus—the ability to direct your attention and thoughts toward the task at hand. She quickly debunked the myth of multitasking by asking the audience



ENGAGING: Sport psychologist Dr. Jenny Susser was a dynamic speaker

members to pair up and then to simultaneously write the alphabet while giving the other person directions to the barn from home. The truth is, we can think of only one thing at a time—and most of us don't focus as well as we think we do, Susser said. Developing focus, like developing confidence, takes practice and is an ongoing challenge.

What you focus on is as important as the ability to zero in on a topic. Practice replacing negative thoughts—"I'm so tired, I'm can't possibly ride well," "It's chilly and windy, so I'm sure my horse will spook"—with positive ones that envision a good performance. Elite athletes talk about honing their focus to the point that everything outside the field of play disappears and they see and hear only the performance arena. Developing that level of razor-sharp focus doesn't happen overnight, but an improvement of just 10 percent will make a huge difference, Susser said.

Realistic, concrete goals (Susser calls them "dreams with a deadline") enable the confident, focused athlete to enact a plan for achievement.

"A powerful goal allows great set-up, intentional planning, focused practice, and appropriate post-competition evaluation," she said.

A goal should be SMART: Specific, Measurable, Action-oriented, Realistic but challenging, Time-sensitive, and with appropriate Support in place. Many people set too-lofty goals (e.g., “ride the perfect dressage test”) and doom themselves to disappointment. Susser told the audience that the criterion for induction into the National Baseball Hall of Fame is a .350 batting average. That’s getting to first base three and a half times out of every ten tries—far from perfection, but a realistic goal.

There are various types of goals: long-term, short-term, competition, and training. Whatever your goals, make sure that everyone involved understands and supports them.

### A Forgiving Approach

With appropriate goals in place, riding and showing can be fulfilling and not frustrating because realistic achievements, not “perfection,” will produce satisfaction, according to Susser.

Do a reality check. Ask yourself: Why do I ride? Why do I compete? If you can’t come up with good reasons, then can you change something to make them more rewarding?

When you ride and show, endeavor to “swim in your own lane,” to use Susser’s analogy from her sport. Meaning: Do your best, don’t try to imitate others, and don’t be concerned about how your rivals are doing.

Most important, understand that developing confidence as a rider is a process that takes time. Forgive yourself (and your horse) for the occasional missteps. We tend to judge ourselves far more harshly than we judge others. Give yourself a break. ▲

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