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Horses and horse sport have captivated us for many years. The horse is mysterious, intelligent and wise in a way we struggle to comprehend. Its no wonder we took up the challenge of partnering with them for competition. This at least dates back to 680 BC when horses were part of the newly founded Olympic Games in Athens. This challenge demands much from its rider, who must be steeped in the art of his or her own psychology. And more and more, it also means being savvy to the psychology of the horse. **Mind Connects to Body**

As with other team sports, how you think effects both yourself and your teammate. It dictates your confidence, your ability to focus and problem solve. Even though horse sport entails being paired with a partner of a different species, your thinking style holds no less weight. As a rider, your thoughts are translated into behavior and non-verbal communication. The psychology of horse sport means knowing and using this fact to your advantage.

Canada's top rider, Ian Millar, practices this art and carefully matches it with the needs of his mount. "There are times when I may be sitting on a horse that needs more energy", he says. "So I do this by changing my thoughts to how important the competition is, how much we need to win. This energy is transmitted to the horse and he changes. Likewise, I may have a sensitive horse who needs to come down a bit, so I focus my thoughts on what a beautiful day it is, what a pleasure it is to be out there, to lighten things up."

For riders to be truly effective, they must realize, as Millar does, the value of training the mind. It's not always easy to catch and change negative thoughts into productive problem solving, but it can be done. This skill is referred to in sport psychology circles as the ability to manage self-dialogue.

One way to do this is to think of all that internal dialogue as your "inner coach". Make it your

goal to get to know this coach- write down your observations of its statements, the way it likes to motivate you; what you think its philosophy may be, in a journal for one month. After you have really gotten to know this internal trainer, you may or may not want to continue retaining their services. If you do, who are you going to look for as a replacement? Or it may seem more prudent to put them on probation, get them to smarten up a little, to work in your best interests. Whatever changes you may be considering, take a look at your individual needs first. Do you need more balance in terms of positive vs. negative feedback? Do you need more compassion and patience for your feelings of fear? Maybe you require more messages about your ongoing progress. It is important to know that you can custom design your inner coach to reflect your personal needs. It may be helpful to flesh out your idea of what type of inner director would suit your needs best. Then you have to actively invite this new coach in, make room for their presence. Unless you aggressively direct yourself to using the new thoughts and approaches, they will not take hold.

### **Thoughts Connect to Emotion**

John Lyons once commented: "There are only two emotions that belong on the saddle; one is a sense of humour and the other is patience." Strong emotions are a part of life and a part of competition. But John is right- many do not belong in the saddle any more than they belong in any productive conversations we hope to have with each other.

The same issues that plague riders off horseback have a nasty way of following them to the barn. Just as an artist reveals part of their inner nature in their work, the way in which you go about creating a relationship with your horse can say a lot about you. Anger management, passivity, avoidance, uncertainty - chances are if one of these or something else is part of your style, it will show up in some way in the manner in which you approach your horse. Of course, as effective as the equine mirror can be, you must first be willing to look. Then you must be willing to work. Emotional control is a crucial tool in a sport where every subtle change in energy will be transmitted to your team member.

Since it is impossible to render yourself emotionless, riders need to develop good 'emotional muscle'. Train yourself to be in charge of your emotions instead of ruled by them. One way to do this is to choose to 'respond instead of react' to your feelings. Get the message your feeling wants you to acknowledge, for example, "I am frustrated because I keep making mistakes". Then, instead of just reacting (pulling on your horse's mouth), stop and ask yourself what you need to do about this message. In other words, experience the emotion, but don't let it dictate your ride. You dictate your ride. In this way, feelings become important information instead of destructive sensations. At other times, you may simply need to go back to your acting skills and change your emotional energy. Especially in the thick of competition, you may have to park how you feel until you can properly deal with it. Your horse will thank you.

### **Body Connects to Horse**

All sports are about the power of the body, some more about the finesse. The latter is true of

horse sport. Psychologically minded riders know how to regulate the state of their body. It is the equivalent of practicing your diction in order to communicate distinctly with other people.

Regulation involves knowing how to clear your body of tension through relaxation practice. Real relaxation involves a different physiological state characterized by a reduction in heart rate, respiration rate, blood pressure, analytical thinking, and skeletal muscle tension. For riders, the most important benefit that comes from learning the skill of managing your body is the improvement in the feel or connection with your horse. Excess tension in your body acts as interference in the communication between you and your horse. To communicate clearly, you need to remove that interference, which can be accomplished with regular practice of relaxation strategies. Tools like breath control and progressive muscle relaxation on and off horseback. The payoff is more horse rider conversations free of conflicting messages that may confuse aids.

### **Learning to Speak Horse**

Imagine you found yourself in a foreign country surrounded by unfamiliar people and customs. You would have to find a way to bridge this gap if you wanted to get around. You may take to learning a few words and phrases of the new language, or use gestures and other body language to make your needs understood. When it comes to horses, you must create a shared language of pressure and release. The language you seek to develop is based on the way you use your body and energy. In other words, since your equine buddy cannot pick up an English language course at the local rural college, you have to step into his world and learn a little about speaking horse.

It used to be our relationship with horses was solely based on domination and compliance. Now, however, an important paradigm shift has occurred that is producing kinder gentler horsemen. Horse whisperers and behaviorists are teaching us about the language of horse. Now is the age of respect and relationship, and to be really successful, riders need to understand their partners on their own turf. This means understanding that horses are prey animals, and we are normally the predators. This does not make for instant trust. Rather, it means earning a connection that will eventually lend itself to a sporting partnership.

Yes, you are the leader in this joint venture but that doesn't mean you get to forget to listen respectfully. A smart manager knows that employees are vital to the running of their company, and will actively listen to their opinions. You should consider doing the same for your teammate. Sometimes we don't listen by jumping in (repeatedly asking and asking for a movement without waiting to see what the horse's response is), or judging (your focus is what is right or wrong, not on the process of the conversation. An example of the latter would be the perfectionist rider who gets so wrapped up in things being "right" they forget to attend to their horse's needs.

So how can you, a human being, partner and communicate with this powerful animal to achieve a desired goal? This is the true gift and test of the psychology of horse sport. Are you up for the challenge?