Mental Skills Training For Dressage

Kenneth Ravizza, Ph.D.

Many dressage riders claim that to perform well in competitions it is at least 50% physical training and 50% mental. But how much time does the rider spend developing the mental skills to perform in the pressure situation? The mental skills, such as relaxation, concentration, stress management and imagery are not magic, but just like the physical skills they take time and practice to develop.

I have been working with dressage riders for the past six years. Of all the sports I have dealt with, riding is one of the most difficult because the rider has to contend with the horse as well as him/herself. The horse can tell when the rider is uptight; it is not like football where the player can hide in the group and then explode on the opponent to release the tension. In dressage, one has to learn to control the inner tension and use that adrenalin and added energy to enhance performance.

My purpose here is to discuss how riders can learn to control their reactions to pressure so they can concentrate and be consistent in their performances. My goal in working with riders is to help them learn the mental skills so they can ride in the actual show as well as they do in practice. The major premise of my approach is that the rider must be in control of one's self before he/she attempts to control the horse and the performance. The competitive rider has limited control of external environment (judges, ring condition, crowd) but has total control over how he/she chooses to respond to it. For this reason this paper will focus on the rider learning the mental skills to control his/herself so the focus can be on the task at hand. I will not be concerned with controlling the horse and/or getting the horse to relax. The rider's instructors are better prepared to do that.

Know Yourself

In order to gain control, it is essential the athlete knows one's self. He/she must know their strengths and weaknesses: How excited does one need to be to perform well? What types of situations are viewed as stressful? How does one talk to one's self during performance? Where does the rider experience tension in the body and how does this affect his/her thoughts on performance? This understanding is important so there are no surprises by stress reactions, but the rider is then prepared to deal with them appropriately. Awareness aids in learning to control stress levels by knowing stress signals: butterflies, self-doubts, shoulder tension, and/or negative self-talk. The rider must learn to accept these feelings and let them function as a signal that adjustments need to be made. Thus, tension is the body's way of telling one's self that it needs attention. Stress signals let the rider know that he/she needs to adjust to reach that ideal emotional level which allows best performance. The goal is not to eliminate stress but to channel that energy into performance.

Every rider has an ideal arousal level for performance where there is not too much tension or relaxation. Each rider is different in regards to the level of arousal they need to perform. Some riders need to be very keyed-up; others are half asleep before they perform. One method of assessment is for the rider to reflect on the best performances and recall how excited he/she was. Use this information to obtain a similar arousal level before the next performance.

Riders take the time to learn the strengths and weaknesses of their horses, how the horse reacts in the ring, and how to prepare the horse for a show. This same information is needed about the rider. It is critical to know him/herself as a rider.

Six-Step Approach to Self-Regulation

1. The rider should reflect on past ideal performances to determine the personal arousal level and the mental preparation for that performance.

2. Recognize the stressors (perceived pressures) in competition, e.g. judges, competitors, crowd, etc. It is important to anticipate potential distractions so one can prepare for them. By preparing for stressors, it will help the rider's confidence because he/she will have strategy to help them cope effectively. The goal is to eliminate any "surprise situations" or distractions at the competition which prevent the rider from focusing on the task at hand.

3. Identify one's personal manifestations of stress so he/she can recognize when the arousal level is either too high or too low. The key is to recognize it early so it can be controlled before it affects the performance.

4. Learn effective coping strategies such as relaxation, breathing, centering and imagery techniques which facilitate gaining control of one's self.

5. Once the rider is in control, the final step is to remain centered and balanced as he/she assesses how the horse may be doing on that particular day. It is critical for the rider to remain in control as he/she responds to the horse so the rider can make the appropriate adjustments. Many riders get upset with the horse and they lose control of themselves. The goal at this stage is to establish the relationship with the horse.

6. The final step is to focus on the task-relevant cues of the performance. At this point the focus of attention must move beyond one's self, the horse and be directed on the execution of the ingredients of the dressage routine. It is at this phase where one must trust one's self, the training and immerse one's thoughts into the performance.

These methods must be individualized and practiced so they can be implemented in the pressure situation.
Mental Preparation for Performance

The goal of mental preparation is to do everything within one's control to contribute to consistent performance. Consistency begins long before actual performance. There are certain things one can do to enhance performance by establishing a game plan.

1. Arrival at Competition Site. First take care of the horse's physical needs and get all the technical items taken care of, i.e., food for horse, assessing riders conditions, etc.

2. Familiarization With Warm-up Ring. The rider should take one's time to check out and, if possible, walk through his/her pre-performance routine. Check the warm-up ring and remind one's self of personal goals in the warm-up ring. Many riders do not have a mission in their warm-up because they are so focused on the actual performance. It is critical to "take care of business" in the warm-up ring and not get caught up in all the confusion, distractions and tensions which are often present. Remember, the goal is not to win warm-ups! I have seen many riders leave their best performances in the warm-up ring.

3. Transition to Performance Ring. Transition from the warm-up ring to the performance starting point is a critical period. This is where the rider is in total control and moves in a centered-balanced manner. Be certain not to rush through it. One goal at this phase is to focus on the transition and be in control of one's self. As the rider waits for the previous rider to exit the ring, he/she should focus on breathing, steadying the horse and on good execution of the first segment of the performance.

4. Actual Performance. The rider should not begin at the starting bell until he/she is ready. Remember, ready means being totally focused on the task at hand. One method of checking this is to take a nice, slow breath and relax while exhaling. If a rider cannot control his/her breath, it will be very difficult to control the horse's performance. The goal is to take care of one thing at a time by focusing on the task at hand. If the rider makes a mistake, the attention should be pulled back to the skill. A common performance problem occurs when the rider makes a mistake and carries it with him/her, e.g., "Boy, did I blow that part...what a jerk I am." This type of negative distracting thought interferes with the rider's concentration by pulling the attention away from the present moment. It is often these minor mental lapses that the horse recognizes and, then begins to get out of control. In any performance there is no perfection, only the illusion of perfection. Thus, the rider has to constantly adjust and compensate to the demands of the situation and the horse.

Information prepares the rider for adversity. He/she must then learn various mental skills to regulate his/her arousal level in the pressure situation. The final point is to establish a mental game plan for each segment of the warm-up and the actual performance. One final note, each rider is unique and methods must be developed which meet the individual needs.

Mental skills training can help the rider develop abilities to gain control of his/herself, thus permitting the rider to adjust to the distractions of the horse and/or the pressures of the dressage routine.

GOAL SETTING FOR DRESSAGE

WHY GOAL SETTING HELPS

1. Provides direction
2. You know where you stand each day
3. The student and teacher work together to set goals
4. Focuses attention and action
5. Mobilizes effort

KEY POINTS TO REMEMBER IN GOAL SETTING

1. Balance your goals
   Performance
   Personal
   Social
   Career
2. Clearly define your goals
   Be specific
3. Performance goals instead of outcome goals. E.g., I want to be successful with a certain skill in my routine four out of five times in practice today.
4. Set realistic goals
5. Establish short (daily/weekly), medium (2-3 months), long (end of season) goals
6. Establish a strategy to meet goals
7. Evaluate and adjust goals

QUESTIONS TO ASK

1. How long have I wanted this goal?
2. What have I done to date to achieve it?
3. How close am I to reaching it?
4. Why is it important?
5. What are my short, medium and long range goals to achieve this?

Dr. Ravizza serves as consultant to athletic departments, teams and individual athletes in providing stress management skills and coping strategies designed to maximize performance for intercollegiate, Olympic and professional athletes. He has joined Dr. Robert Rotella in working with the USEF 1988 Olympic Team. Dr. Ravizza is a professor in the Dept. of Health, Physical Education and Recreation at California State University, Fullerton.

Conclusion

In order to enhance dressage performance the rider must learn to control his/herself before attempting to control the situation and/or horse. The rider must know him/herself and how she/he reacts to pressure. This