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Letter from the Editor

Dear Reader,

When I was four years old, I got my first pony. Though it was specifically my first pony, I had been around horses for my whole life. Both my parents, sister, cousins, grandparents, and extended family all rode horses, so to say I come from an equestrian-involved family would be an understatement. Much like my sister, growing up I competed in horseshows. In 2019, I received a grant to go to USEF Pony Finals where they provided me with a pony to show. That show opened my eyes to the amount of pressure riders face each time they enter the ring. As I continued to move up in the ring, I was faced with the same pressures that I had seen, and this is when I became invested in sports psychology. I wanted to know what pushed riders to the top, and it seemed that the mental game was a large factor in the riders' rounds.

My thesis examines the impact that sports psychology has in playing a part in competition, specifically in the equestrian sport. I explore the importance of being mentally prepared as well as the different tools and strategies used by athletes to enhance their mental game while understanding how each technique benefits the athlete. These tools include breathing techniques, visualization, goal setting, and relaxation strategies. Sports psychology is becoming more and more prevalent, and my thesis examines its relevance and overall importance.

- Lexi



An Overview



With only 45 seconds left on the basketball court scoreboard's ticking clock, you are four points down; your teammates are counting on you to give it your all, and how you perform under pressure will be the deciding factor on who will win the game. In this situation, it is not just skill that is needed to walk out with a win, but the mental skills to keep your performance at a peak. Sports psychology is a key factor in encouraging an athlete to be the best that they can be. What many people, athletes, and coaches are not aware of is how important sports psychology is as it relates to the equestrian sport. When it comes to using mental strategies to enhance the performance of athletes, riders and the equestrian community have been late to the game. The equestrian sport can be one of the most pressuring and mentally draining sports due to the fact that it is not just one mind you are working with, but two. As well-trained as the animal may be, it is still an animal with its own brain that can be unpredictable. This is one of the reasons behind the importance of sports psychology within the equestrian sport. Sports psychology is necessary in equestrian sports in order for athletes to succeed at a high level due to the many factors that are a part of the sport.

It is important to note that, not only is sports psychology important to the equestrian sport, but it is relevant to all sports and aspects of life. The skills learned with a sports psychologist can translate to

public speaking, test taking, or anything that can cause anxiety or nerves.

The Equestrian Sport

The equestrian sport is unlike any other. There are many different disciplines that an equestrian may be trained in, while some of the most popular are the hunters, jumpers, and equitation. Instead of having a ball as the main object of the game, riders have their horses, and these horses have complete minds of their own, while a ball does not. This is one of the many reasons that explain why the equestrian sport is incredibly unpredictable. Maybe in basketball and soccer, the player may have to worry about where the teammates are on the court or field, but a rider has to worry if her horse—a physical beast with a mind of its own—will shy away from the plastic bag blowing in the wind or the sound of the lawnmower over the hill. This could ultimately cause the riders to be looking up at the horse from the ground, wondering how in the .2 seconds that just occurred they ended up there. In most sports, it is usually fair to believe that the school with the black jerseys that smoked the team with the red jerseys in the game two weeks ago will once again

beat the team with the red jerseys; however, this is not the case with equestrian. Though it can be typical for the rider who won the class last week to win the class again this week, there is much more unpredictability that is involved in the sport, and it cannot be nearly as foreseeable that the win would happen again. Instead, the girl who won last week may have pulled a rail, missed a lead change, or gone off-course this week. Riding can never be completely fair, for there will always be a nicer horse out there. That is not to say that the rider with the more trained horse will always do better than the rider with the green (inexperienced) horse, but that is what makes the sport so complicated.

Some days, the odds are just not in your favor. The lack of sleep, lack of proper meals, and the energy exerted on sport can be extremely draining, causing the rider to be distracted easily. Riders also must learn how to overcome challenges. When the horse and rider enter the ring for their first trip and it does not go according to plan, or the rider finds out the horse is scared of the yellow flowers under the jumps, the equestrian must be prepared to go back in for the second trip and conquer the challenges they had in the first trip. Dr. Ann Reilly pointed out in an interview that it is important to let go of the first round no matter what the scenario. If it was a good first trip, the rider must let go of the pressure she is putting on herself to make the second trip just as good. If the first round was not good, she must not let the mistakes phase her in the eight minutes she is sitting outside the in-gate waiting to enter the ring for her second trip. The equestrian sport is extremely dissimilar to other types of sports, and some may argue that sport psychology is most needed for equestrian, for there are so many moving parts in and around the sport (Reilly).



Specifics on Sports Psychology

Sports psychology is defined as “the study of psychological factors that influence athletic performance and how participation in sports and exercise can affect the psychological and physical well-being of athletes” (Simkus). In more specific terms, sports psychology is characterized by the usage of the human brain to enhance performance, the development of the ability to overcome struggles that may appear from the competitive lifestyle of an athlete, and the assistance of



emotional support and development to the athlete; “by developing mental toughness, athletes can learn how to handle these problems without being knocked down, which in turn can help them reach optimal performance. This is done by learning to have faith in their own skills and abilities, a desire to succeed, and the ability to thrive despite setbacks” (Burylo). In order for the athlete to truly become the best they can be, they must develop this mental toughness Burylo speaks of. The brain benefits from the “many tools available to assist athletes in this endeavor and include many of the skills and strategies that are familiar to the public such as goal setting, positive self-talk, energy regulation, and visualization, among others” (Haefner).

In other words, by using the various tools given through sports psychology including breathing exercises, goal setting, and self-talk, an athlete can produce a stronger and more enhanced athletic performance. The development of the ability to overcome struggles that may appear from the competitive lifestyle of an athlete refers to the high-pressure positions and way of living the athlete routinely experiences. The assistance of emotional support and development is crucial in that the athlete learns to eventually deal with and regulate their emotions. Without emotional support and development, athletes run the risk of letting their emotions control their way of playing the game, whether that be in a nervous manner, causing them to freeze up, or in another way (Haefner).

Sports psychology has been studied for over 100 years; however, it wasn't until 1978 that the idea was taken more seriously. For a long time, “the perception that only elite and Olympic athletes utilized sport psychologists” was a problem, and it wasn't until later

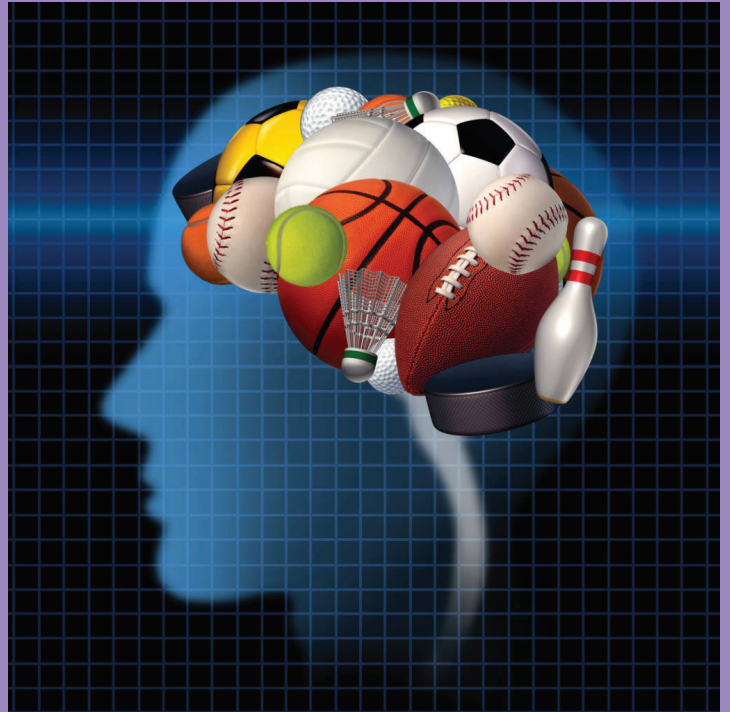
that amateurs, college athletes, and other athletes would be able to use the tool (“Sport and Fitness Psychology”). The idea has gained worldwide attention and is considered relevant to all sports. Many athletes have been reluctant to the idea due to a certain stigma that has been placed on sports psychology, but they must learn that sports psychology is not always utilized because there is a “problem” with that individual. People should instead be interested in sports psychology because of their desire to achieve optimal performance in the sport (Reilly). The use of sports psychology in equestrian has been especially delayed compared to other sports due to its small, close-knit “bubble” of people.

Sports psychology is utilized by a variety of athletes, whether they are Olympic gymnasts or high school basketball players. The main purpose of sports psychology is to enhance the performance of an athlete or give the athlete the tools to hit his or her peak, and “sports psychologists work with athletes to combat the stresses that come with playing their sport, teaching important skills.” By helping athletes train their brains, they can be taught to compartmentalize, focus, and get the best out of themselves and their efforts. Athletes are constantly being put under pressure to perform well while also being “faced with criticism from coaches, family members, media personalities, and more” (“Sports Psychology: Mindset”). These constant put-downs and pressures can burden the athlete, causing them to lose focus of the game, fear failure, and worry more about the mentally draining judgments they are encountering. Sports psychology helps to ensure the athletes remain focused and relaxed and manage their nerves to the best of their ability.



The Connection Between Sports Psychology and the Equestrian Sport

Specifically regarding the equestrian sport, sports psychology is used for the same reason it is used in any other sport. It is used to give riders the tools they need to overcome obstacles put in their path, both literally and figuratively. The equestrian sport is unlike any other, for each rider is never on an even playing field. The equestrian is riding a horse that has a mind of its own, with its own personality. It has its own fight-or-flight instincts, treats it likes, and sounds and sights it spooks at. This unpredictability causes a disadvantage for every rider at the in-gate. These disadvantages can cause roadblocks that not only require physical skills to get around but also mental. The mental skills needed can be taught through sports psychology. Psychologist Janet Edgette even explains that “most riders, when anxious about a show or clinic, either ‘over-ride’ or ‘under-ride.’ Over-riders kick and grab, making one decision and then another and typically apply exaggerated aids that annoy or confuse their horses.” She explains that these riders are unable to relax, and will try to do everything at once in order to control the situa-



tion. She also explains that under-riders, while possibly just as nervous, are the opposite, as they do not want to make mistakes, so they do not make any decisions at all. They basically do not ride at all, but instead just sit there on the horse, leaving the horse with no direction or guidance (Edgette). Sports psychology provides athletes the tools to counteract these nerves and manage the fear that comes when entering the show ring or getting on a horse.

Psychological Techniques

There are many other different psychological tools and strategies used for specific situations and specific people. Most sports psychology techniques translate to all sports; the main tools and strategies that would be used in tennis, basketball, or other sports can mostly be used in the equestrian sport, as well. Some of these tools include goal setting, positive self-talk, breathing exercises, and relaxation techniques. Rebecca Burylo explains that “You can help athletes by using sports psychology to teach them techniques to: relax, avoid distractions, build self-confidence, and change negative thinking” (Burylo). Focus and relaxation tend to be central points in sports psychology, and “concentration and attention are often enhanced with strategies, such as reciting key phrases to oneself, remaining centered in the present, sustaining attention during distractions and using imagery and self-talk to refocus when distracted.” In order to be in the proper headspace to participate in the sport, it is important to remain focused and direct one’s attention to the task at hand. It is possible, however, to be too engrossed in trying to stay focused that one forgets to let oneself be immersed in the actual activity or sport itself. It is important to note that “the most complete attention (sometimes called ‘flow’ or ‘the zone’) is usually experienced as a joyful absorption in the moment rather than conscious struggle” (“Mental Skills”). When an athlete concentrates on staying attentive, it is impossible for her to truly relax in the setting of the sport itself. She loses the ability to perform at her peak due to overthinking. The athlete cannot focus on what she needs to do to get the job done because she is too concerned about “being in her own head.” This flow zone is similar to performing at one’s peak. It is where everything seems to go in the athlete’s direction, and they are so



involved and immersed in the game that they lose sight of all else.

This flow zone and this peak in performance is the goal. It is where athletes strive to be when they play in their game or perform in their competition. Sports psychologists help get the athlete to this point by giving them mental tools. With the guidance of sports psychologists, athletes add tools to their toolbox and possibly edit tools that they already have stored at the bottom of their toolbox. One of the tools in the toolboxes include having a pre-performance routine.



Pre-Performance Routines

A pre-performance routine can include the “physical and mental actions the athlete goes through before a performance. This technique may help give an individual a sense of consistency, predictability, relaxation, and control.” In the way a soccer player would play the same playlist on a bus ride before each game in order to get pumped up and locked in, a rider may put in her headphones while sitting by the ring, watching the other competitors ride their courses, all while going over her own track in her head. These pre-performance rituals can utilize other sports psychology strategies in the ritual; a primary example would be visualization in order to plan and execute the ride and course that the athlete will perform. This visualization could include motor imagery, “a vivid mental rehearsal or simulation involving multiple senses, which allows the individual to feel what the actual event will be like” (“Sport and Fitness Psychology”). To complete this properly, many people close their eyes to get the benefits of the visualization. Others will actually walk on their horses, simulating the course in a much smaller and sized-down way. By visualizing the jumps while literally being on the horse, including walking and steering it, it helps to understand what the real ride will feel like.

Visualization

Visualization, sometimes known as motor imagery, is “a vivid mental rehearsal or simulation involving multiple senses, which allows the individual to feel what the actual event will be like” (“Sport and Fitness Psychology”). Abigail Lufkin wrote about a study that involved visualization with three sets of basketball players. Each group of players was studied with regard to the percentage of free throws they were making. For the following month, the first group was stopped from playing basketball and were also not supposed to think about the sport at all. The second group practiced, but they did not practice visualization, and the third group’s mission was to visualize. They were to visualize the form and the mechanics of shooting the free throw each day. Lufkin explained that, unsurprisingly, the first group did not show any improvement; however, “the group that only physically practiced and the group that only visualized both improved significantly to a near identical degree.” This study supports the importance of visualization and its benefits in all sports, not only riding. However, Lufkin also states that “the implications of this for riding are tremendous, as one can only jump so many jumps or ride a horse for so long. We can, however, jump thousands of fences in our mind and improve our skills exponentially without ever leaving the barn” (Lufkin). Visualization satisfies the rider’s needs and the horse’s needs, so the horse can have a break and the rider can still continue to grow and learn as an equestrian. There are two types

of visualizations. The first is the type that can help you learn a new skill. Specifically to riding, Lufkin explains that you should “go over in your mind what it feels like [to do whatever you are trying to do]. See yourself from the outside performing the move flawlessly. Then, feel yourself on the horse” (Lufkin). While practicing this exercise, it is best to imagine it in all its complexities. As Lufkin stated, visualizing it from a person watching it perspective as well as visualizing riding the actual horse can “greatly enhance how quickly and thoroughly you are able to perform





the actual exercise.” This again is both beneficial to the horse and the rider because the rider can focus on learning while not wearing the horse out. The other type of visualization that Lufkin describes is the type that one would experience before the individual enters the ring to ride their course or the night before their show. This is where the rider actually “practices” the ride of the course mentally beforehand. It is noted that “Visualization in sports or mental imagery is a way of conditioning for your brain for successful outcomes. The more you mentally rehearse your performance, the more it becomes habituated in your mind” (“Sports Visualization”). Lufkin explains that “the more vivid you can make this, the more senses you can recruit for the visualization, the more powerful it will be” (Lufkin). It is important to really put yourself in the experience and “use as many senses as possible” (“Sports Psychology/Mental Training”). By hearing the horse's hooves, feeling the breeze on your face while your horse is rhythmically cantering underneath you, feeling where your legs need to be on the sides of the horse, and how much to pull and give will help you ride the next ride you have. (“Sports Psychology/Mental Training”). Knowing what has been taught with sports psychology,

we have learned that “athletes who use visualization can eliminate some of the unknowns that create competitive anxiety. When athletes use visualization, they not only see the action unfold but truly feel the event take place in their mind’s eye” (“Sports Visualization”). You will already have a clear picture in your head of what you need to do for the round to be successful. Though you can still get thrown curveballs, it will simplify what the necessary actions you need to take, so you are not rushed with different ideas and steps to take.

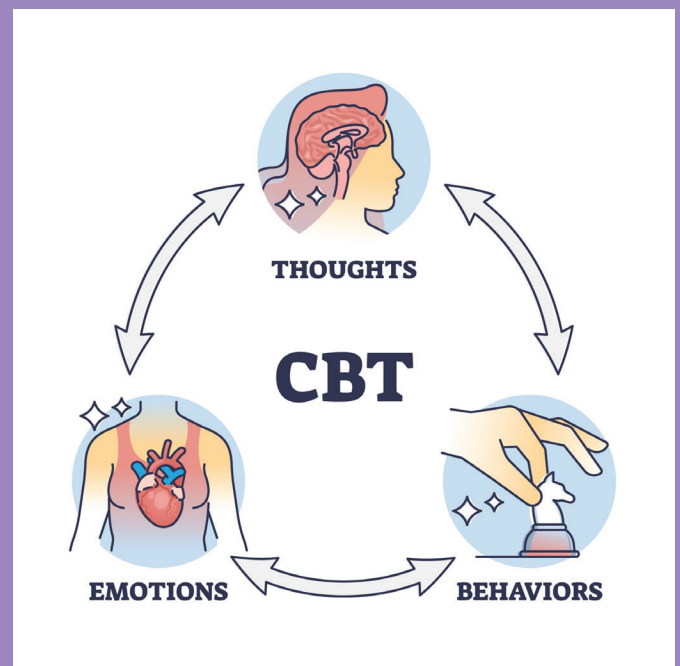
Lufkin also mentions the importance of letting go. She claims that “continuing to think about it will lead to rumination and obsession, two things that disable the very flow we are trying to achieve. After the visualization, you have done everything you can do” If a rider continues to obsess, then he or she will never reach the zone which is the state that you must strive to be in. This is the state where everything just seems to come naturally, and by focusing your attention on something else, you will disrupt this state. Lufkin also emphasizes that “you have to trust that all your hard work and focus are inside you and will be there when called upon.” This is the idea that you have the confidence in knowing that you are prepared and must trust

the steps you have taken to get to this point. If you are at the in-gate about to go in to show, it is important to take a breath and understand that you have done everything you can do. There is no point in worrying that you did not prepare or do enough leading up because at that moment, you are where you are. You cannot go back and change or fix anything you have done. You must take it as it is: focus on what is ahead of you and what you must do in the present to make it as productive and successful as it can possibly be in order to do the best you can. This mental preparation is just as important as the physical.

Cognitive Behavioral Therapy

Many sports psychologists use cognitive behavioral therapy, or CBT, to help riders beat their anxiety. Bridget Flynn Walker, a psychologist with her Ph.D.,

explains that cognitive behavioral therapy “involved changing exaggerated, fear-based beliefs by adjusting specific behaviors - most notably, the avoidance and safety behaviors in which you engage.” In a more basic sense, the way you change your thinking is based on changing your “behaviors.” Psychologists often use exposure therapy to encourage this process. Walker explains that “the goal of doing exposures is to put yourself in a trigger situation while refraining from doing avoidance or safety behaviors.” This means that an individual practices a situation where they tend to become anxious or stressed. He or she would be aware of what their “avoidance behaviors” are, and actively practice not engaging in them. This is “an intervention to extinguish the fear response that an anxious person has unwittingly fed and maintained by habitually engaging



in them. This is “an intervention to extinguish the fear response that an anxious person has unwittingly fed and maintained by habitually engaging in avoidance and safety behaviors”(Walker, “Expert Tips”). This form of cognitive therapy is well-used in the psychology world and benefits many riders with their anxiety.



Just Breathe

Another well-used strategy involves breathing exercises. Breathing exercises are used to focus the mind and relax athletes, and many times, they are used in hand with visualization. Some sports psychologists teach a breathing exercise that starts with a deep breath in and counting the number fifty, then taking another breath and counting down to forty-nine. The athlete continues to breathe and count down until they reach zero. This breathing practice helps with focus and relaxation, and the athlete can use it anywhere. Whether on her horse about to go into the show ring or coming out of the ring frazzled with another course to do, it is a great way to keep emotions under control and focus on the task at hand. It can also help calm oneself down before bed and can be used if one cannot fall asleep. There are many other breathing exercises that can help calm the mind and focus one's attention. Each breathing technique depends on the person and the situation.



positive self-talk possible and beneficial. She states, “What I say to myself, my body attempts to fulfill” (Lufkin). This idea supports the fact that positive self-talk can reinforce the brain's thoughts; therefore the body will do its best to “fulfill” these positive thoughts. It provides confidence to the mind which is important because “Athletes that allow the smallest amount of self-doubt into their thinking will most likely see a decrease in their performance. Self-confidence can make or break an athlete's performance because it facilitates concentration, affects goals, increases effort, and more” (“The Relationship”). Self-talk leads to confidence, and confidence leads to an effective mind.

Lufkin explains that the first step in taking this journey is to simply pay attention to what you say to yourself. Do you talk yourself through events in a kind way? Are you constantly speaking negatively about yourself either internally or externally? These questions that one will ask herself will help her gauge

where they are in their journey. This means that if you talk negatively about yourself often, it will be a longer and more rigorous transfer to positive self-talk than one who already tends to speak positively to the self. Lufkin explains that once these thought patterns are identified, you should then begin to switch the negative thoughts out for positive ones. She says you should not “create pie in the sky positives, [but] create ones in which you can believe” (Lufkin). In this case, Lufkin explains that “I am horrible” should be replaced with “I am trying.” It will not help to say “I am perfect” because then you are taking out the room to grow and evolve. Lufkin also tells us that “our brains are unable to process negatives. This means you must tell your



Self-Talk

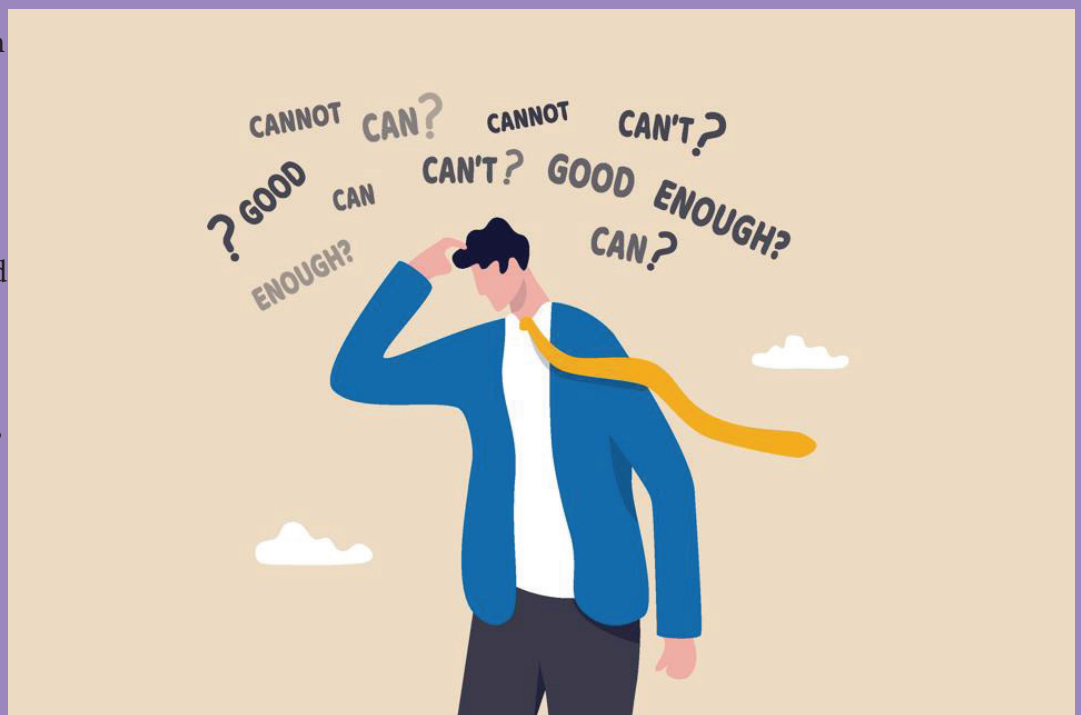
Self-talk is also widely encouraged in the sports psychology world. There is a very specific therapeutic “treatment” for this negative self-talk. This refers to “the idea that self-talk can have benefits is among the fundamental principles underlying the development of cognitive-behavioral therapies: treatments aiming at changing individuals' thoughts, interpretations, and behaviors” (Hatzigeorgiadis et al.). It is the process of literally changing what one says to himself or herself. Lufkin explains in *The Chronicle of the Horse* that the connection between the body and mind is what makes

body what you want it to do, not what you don't want it to do." Instead of filling your head with "do nots" as in, "do not look down," fill your head with positives including "look up." Your brain is then able to register these ideas, giving you the ability to have a game plan. By being clear and positive, your body will reward you by doing what you are asking.

Expressing positive self-talk can be done anywhere, whether at home looking in the mirror, or when you are about to walk in the in-gate at a horse show. In either space, it will frame your mind into a positive and workable place which will help you accomplish what you want to accomplish. Hatzigeorgiadis and colleagues state, "A categorization of self-talk cues into two broad dimensions was established, with cues described as instructional or motivational." This means that the motivational cues (or self-talk) are told in a way that is meant to hype yourself up. An example of this would be saying, "I got this" or "I can do this." On the other hand, however, instructional self-talk refers to giving yourself direction. It is, as one would assume, instructing yourself to do something. An example of this would include saying, "eyes up" if you are talking about riding or "elbow in" if you were fixing a habit in basketball. The difference in these, specifically to the equestrian sport, lies in what you are doing at that moment. Hatzigeorgiadis explains that "instructional self-talk should be more effective for tasks requiring precision and timing, whereas motivational self-talk should be more effective for tasks requiring strength and endurance." This means that in most cases, instructional self-talk is best used for practice and visualization while motivational self-talk should be used while in the actual show ring or while you are about to enter the ring for your round. Theodorakis, Hatzigeorgiadis, and Chroni put self-talk benefits into five categories, including "enhancing attentional focus, increasing confidence, regulating effort, controlling cognitive and emotional reactions, and triggering automatic execution." To fully profit from one's self-talk, it is important to select keywords that make sense

and connect with the idea that you are focused on in that moment and for that specific situation. This will provide the benefits of the self-talk to its fullest potential.

With regard to self-talk, many people have heard the expression "Fake it till you make it," but what many most likely don't know is that there is actual science behind the theory, and sports psychologists use this technique to help their patients. As humans, "our natural tendency is to act out what we feel" (Lufkin). We express our emotions on our faces, in our body language, and the way we communicate. These expressions support and reassure the emotions that we produce, creating an "emotional cycle." Lufkin explains, however, that this cycle can also work in reverse, putting the fake it till you make it principle into reality. Lufkin asserts that "if you are feeling scared and nervous, but you force yourself to smile and make some sort of casual joke, you actually become calmer. Through your actions, you reassure your mind that everything is alright." This means that anytime you are feeling nervous before a competition, by pasting on a smile, you actually make yourself more relaxed and feel better. Lufkin emphasizes that the best way to incorporate this into your routine is to first just begin to smile in your day when it is not something that would cross your mind. If you are sitting at your desk or riding your horse and you are extremely focused, just smile. Your brain will send your body the message that it is in control of the situation going on, and that it should feel at ease. This will bring your nerves down a bit;



therefore, concentration will be achieved much easier. Lufkin states that it is helpful for her to smile because the “small ritual helped [her] body to believe that this was just another day, just another outing. Everything was fine and [she] was in control.” By adding this into a pre-game or pre-competition ritual, it tames the brain, creating a much more enjoyable ride. This confidence-building technique can result in serious benefits.



Sports Psychology's Relevance in the Equestrian Sport

Sports psychology is an important subject that factors into the way one performs in the athletics arena and supports the notion that the mind can both benefit and hinder execution in sport. The mind is one of the most powerful tools in sports, yet to use it to your benefit is one of the most difficult skills to master. An individual can practice one specific physical skill for hours, yet the mental aspect of athletic performance is quite often overlooked or understated. Athletes, regardless of sport, often have a coach who leads and prepares the athlete for their competition; however, not many individuals have a sports psychologist easily accessible to him or her, making it much more difficult to mentally prepare as well as realize the importance and necessity of having a strong mental game. Patrick Cohn, a recognized sports psychologist, explains that many people are reluctant to the idea of mental training because “they think that mental training is a sign of weakness” (Cohn). He claims that many athletes worry about the way others will view them if they seek mental training, which then prevents them from doing the psychological preparation needed. There are many techniques and strategies that go into sports psychology, including visualization, breathing techniques, self-talk, and relaxation. All of these help athletes perform their best.

Countless athletes will focus on physical training, but forget about the mental aspect. They put in hours a day to practice for their sport, and do nothing

for the mental side; however, it is understandable that it is difficult to find resources for mentally preparing. Once they have a foundation, however, it is easy to take the steps to mentally prepare and all it takes is a bit of research. Many coaches and athletes agree that “success is at least fifty if not ninety percent mental, and yet we devote so little time to our mental preparation” (Lufkin). In order to hit the highest quality of our athletic capabilities, one must prepare mentally. An athlete will not be able to perform her best if she does not provide herself with time to mentally lay the groundwork.

In the equestrian sport, it is important to remember that the athlete is dealing with a live animal that has a mind of its own. Because of this, it can be very intimidating with regard to not knowing what the horse's next move will be. Bridget Walker states that “you've got to deal with two beings—horse and rider—which multiplies the possibility of missteps and mistakes. It's easy to get stuck in the fear of making errors, but this invariably has a negative effect on performance” (Walker, “Recognizing Riding-Related Anxiety”). The mistakes that are made in riding can be completely out of the rider's control, making the sport both very difficult and frustrating. Sports psychology is extremely important and beneficial for this reason. Walker also explains that “your behaviors affect your horse, and vice versa. Researchers have found that horses truly are “emotional sponges” in their interac-



“A flexible attitude will allow you to relax providing for a better performance. Don't focus so much on yourself. Other people don't care as much about you as you do” (“Sports Psychology/Mental Training”).

tions with humans. Because of your horse's sensitivity to your emotions, you want to be mindful of how you express yourself around your horse” (Walker, “Expert Tips”). Equestrian is much different than other sports because in other sports like soccer or basketball, the emotions one is feeling, whether it is anger or anxiety, are your own emotions. However, when riding, the emotions the individual feels will then be transferred to the horse, making the anxiety the athlete is feeling also the anxiety that the horse now has to deal with. This can disrupt the whole competition for a rider and her horse. With sports psychology, athletes can feel confident about their rides without these factors interrupting their performance.

My Personal Experience with Sports Psychology

On a personal level, I worked with Dr. Reilly at a four day horse show a couple months ago. With my schedule, I spoke with her starting about a week out, telling her about my horse, myself, and our strengths and weaknesses. By doing so, she was able to better understand what she was working with. We also did a “practice run” by visualizing the problems that I was struggling most with at that time like lead changes and making sure my horse did not charge or speed up at the jumps.

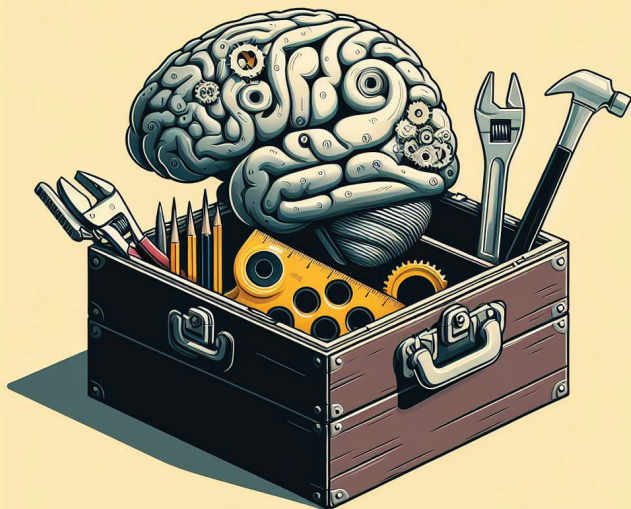
The next call we had was at the horse show, the night before I was first competing. Again, we practiced visualization and relaxation, focusing on saying how I was going to ride and not how I was not going to ride; always keeping it positive. I learned how relaxation and visualization go hand and hand. The next morning, after schooling my horse at five in the morning to get him in the ring, I called Dr. Reilly again in the truck so I was by myself. We, again, worked on visualization, breathing techniques, and not letting my emotions and self-doubts get in the way of just riding and getting it done.

I then spoke with her the next morning after schooling my horse in the ring, so he could see the ins

and outs of the rings and nothing was too spooky for him. We, again, went over visualization of the actual course that was set. We spoke about the plan for the day and the routine I had, like making sure I ate food and the importance of watching others ride the course. We also went over the ways in which I would let go of the owner of the horse watching me and the pressures I was putting on myself to be perfect. Making sure that I was able to put different rounds behind me once they were finished and focusing on the next one was another huge part of the conversation.

We continued to speak every night and morning the days I was showing, making sure no one was around me and there were no distractions. My horse can be quite unpredictable and has what almost seems like mood changes. Because of this, techniques we focused on the first couple of days were different than the ones we worked on the last couple of days. Some things we stayed consistent with were not putting too much pressure on myself due to the owner being there and wanting to make her proud.

When it came to the competition, the first day was extremely successful. My horse and I were fourth out of 25 horses competing. Though the first day was great, I used most of the sports psychology information I had learned the following day. During my first trip, my horse stopped at the first fence, refusing to go over it. I walked out of the ring still holding my breath, looking at my mom, his owner, and my coach's face knowing each one of them had no idea why my horse acted the way he did. I started to get that tense, uptight, and shaky feeling that you feel right before the tears start falling from your eyes. I quickly remembered the strategies that Dr. Reilly and I had discussed, so I took some deep breaths, changed my mindset, and the tears disappeared. I went back in for my second round, and, though it was not easy, it ended up being very successful. This was my first experience with sports psychology, and it was really interesting to learn the ways that it has just as much to do with getting you through the lows in the sports as it does with bringing you to the highs.



Conclusion

Though sometimes overlooked, sports psychology is extremely important. This is especially true to the equestrian sport due to the fact that there is another animal involved. Instead of having teammates that an athlete communicates with, a rider has to communicate with a different species. The high pressures of the unique sport provides an even greater need for sports psychology.

Sports psychology helps athletes reach their full potential. Instead of just training the physical body, sports psychologists train athlete's mental strength, so they can reach their peak performance. There are so many aspects that go into the sessions with a sports psychologist. The psychologist needs to know as much as they can about the rider and her horse, so she can best help the situation. As an example, while working on visualization, a psychologist would need to know what the horse's quirks are specifically, so they can best convey to the athlete what they should be fixing in their round. Each horse is so different, so this is a very important step.

There are many different tools that sport psychologists use. These tools include visualization, breathing techniques, pre-performance routines, self-talk, and cognitive-behavioral therapy. Visualization is the process of thinking of a mental image in order to plan the steps one will be taking in real life to achieve

their goal. This is very helpful in learning a new skill and sharpening the skills a rider already has. Breathing exercises are used to keep calm and help with nerves. By keeping yourself calm, you can keep your horse calm. Pre-performance routines can include anything from listening to music to eating the same breakfast. Self-talk is incredibly important in replacing negative thoughts with positive ones. This could be as simple as changing the words, "this is too hard" to "I got this." This goes right into cognitive-behavioral therapy which not only provides coping skills to situations that can cause stress and anxiety, but also exposes a person to the situation he or she is struggling with head on. All of these strategies contribute to a rider's mental toolbox to help them hit her peak performance.

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