



Achieving Peak Performance —Four Steps to Change Your Mind-Set

By Laura King

Illustration by Susan E. Harris

PEOPLE TEND TO AGONIZE OVER PAST MISTAKES, condemning themselves for not doing something differently. Everyone does it. Athletes can develop serious problems with their mind-set because they overindulge in self-criticism and self-judgment. Riders, like all other athletes, can often be their own worst critics.

Whether it's losing ranking or standing because of a mistake made during a critical competition, or choices made at crucial turning points in life—roads not taken—the mind can lock onto these thoughts and leave you angry and frustrated with yourself. If you're a trainer, perhaps you relive that moment when your student blew a transition that cost the entire competition.

Early in my career as a hypnotherapist, I noticed a trend in the athletes that came to me for help with their performance. All of them were extremely talented, and most

were already very successful in their sport. Looking at them from the outside, it would appear that they were at the top of their game and incredibly confident in their abilities. But they were in my office looking for help with their mind-set.

I began to see a trend, and it had a lot to do with the standards they were setting for themselves. Normally a poor or weak mind-set is the result of constantly over-critiquing one's abilities—to a fault. When these highly skilled, successful, and otherwise confident individuals came to

see me, I realized that they were experiencing trouble in their performance because they were judging themselves, not against other competitors or against their true selves, but *against the unrealistic expectation that they had to perform perfectly each and every time.*

You may have noticed as a trainer that your students believe it is imperative to nail the “perfect spot” on the first fence, to perform flawless transitions, or to have perfect lead changes each and every time. They may get extremely frustrated, embarrassed, and humiliated when they don't perform perfectly; and their performance goes downhill very fast from that first little “mistake” as they start to berate themselves right there in the riding ring.

To overcome the problems that occur because of a poor mind-set, you (and your students) must look at your riding from a brand new perspective. If you want to be successful in your riding, your training business, and in your life, it is crucial that you release the past and stop blaming yourself for events that have already transpired. The past is the past, and unfortunately, we can't go back in time to do things differently. And, seriously, has berating yourself about past mistakes ever helped you or made you feel better? Has it ever improved your performance? If your answer is “no,” read on.

When you make a mistake, it is important to learn to forgive yourself because you are only human. Teach your students that they must not let imperfections, large or small, get the best of them.

“Mistakes are essential to progress. The willingness to learn from them is the backbone of any progress. The object is to succeed, not to count your mistakes.”

—Tae Yun Kim

Once you demand of yourself that you must be perfect, as a rider or a trainer, it's a downhill spiral from there. Judging yourself against a false ideal often transmutes in the mind into being convinced that other people expect you to be perfect as well. You

may have noticed this in one or more of your students. The end result is that riders feel an extraordinarily unnatural and unhealthy amount of pressure when competing in a crowd. In this frame of mind, riders are afraid to be exposed as less than perfect because mistakes are evidence of how flawed they really are. (Which, for the record, isn't a bad thing. It just means they are human.)

Fear of making mistakes causes muscle tension, negative self-talk, loss of focus, and an accompanying array of other harmful thoughts that stand in the way of achieving peak performance. Impress upon your students that if they happen to miss a transition, or chip a fence, this mistake is not a reflection of who they are as people or athletes. It is the way they respond to that mistake that is. This is key:

**Mistakes don't reflect on you as
a person or an athlete—the way you respond to them does.**

As a trainer, you have the ability to guide your students to peak performance using some simple techniques.

- 1 First, it is important to change the frame of mind about past mistakes. One of the many suggestions that I make when my client is in a completely relaxed and highly receptive state of mind is:

You are grateful and thankful for every experience of the past, and for everything connected with those experiences. You find it easy to let go of your fears. You forgive yourself for every mistake you have ever made. You are a part of life, as we all are, and we all move, live, and think as we have a right to. Life goes on, and so do you, growing rich in experience and in the capacity to achieve. You are stronger than anything life can offer.

This simple statement opens the mind up to the endless possibilities; one of which is achieving peak performance. Give this statement to your students on paper in the "I" form (*I am grateful and thankful for every experience...*) and have them read it to themselves each night before they go to sleep.

Remind your students how much they have improved since they started to ride. Remind them of all of the positive experiences they have had, and all of their successes. Teach them the power of positive thinking—to think of themselves as brave, smart, balanced, and confident; to be proud of their achievements; and to believe in their abilities. Most of all remind them that each mistake along the way has been a stepping stone that brought them to their current competitive level.

- 2 Next is the importance of patience. Patience means you are completely committed to achieving peak performance and nothing can stop you. Patience means that you are willing to be kind to yourself as you work through the mistakes and practice, practice, practice until the transitions become automatic. Patience means you will do whatever it takes, however long it takes, to get it right. Imbue this in yourself and your students.
- 3 Mental rehearsal is next, and it is much more than simply visualizing. Mental rehearsal uses all of the senses. This takes prac-

tice, but it is a vital step in achieving peak performance. Have your students practice visualizing, or imagining, the peak performance they want. Where are they? What does the ring look like—the lighting, the crowd, the sounds, the smells, etc.? How does the saddle feel? The reins? Have them imagine perfect posture and all of the nuances of cueing their horse.

Peak performance, flow, the zone, your best performance—they all mean the same thing. In that moment you have no awareness of time or space. Your movements are fluid and spontaneous. You are happy. This is also a great bedtime exercise.

- 4 Positive thought control is the final component. Like the little train that could, thinking and believing that you can achieve peak performance is vital. The subconscious mind is literal, and it will deliver whatever you think about the most. So, when your students do something well, tell them! Teach them the importance of saying it to themselves, out loud, "I did that well." And when they make a mistake, make sure you look for the things they did well or correctly.

Changing your behavior is more than just making the decision to do it. Just as you want your students to practice the new techniques you teach them until they get it right, changing your mind takes practice. Practice these techniques every day with yourself and your students, and teach them to practice on their own.

Peak performance is about allowing your ability to emerge; to be in the zone—that mental state of allowing everything to seamlessly come together without fear or anxiety, without judgment or self-criticism, concentrating only on the task at hand. Peak performance is a mental state—and you can do anything you put your mind to! ■



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