

Developing Mental Toughness

By Laura King



HORSES AND HUMANS: The relationship goes back a long way, but horses were not created just for humans to ride. They willingly work with us, but we also were not created to ride horses. So riding is a cooperative effort that requires rider and horse to work together toward a successful outcome. A successful trainer understands that his or her students' cues to the horse can either create a smooth and easy experience or an adversarial one!

Learning how to cue the horse without over-cueing with exaggerated or reactionary actions is so important. Horses can be cranky, and even show signs of subtle disrespect if they feel they are being "yelled at" by over-cueing. The rider's posture, how relaxed (or tense) he or she is, and even his or her thoughts can affect the rider, and ergo the horse's performance.

Horses are generally very smart and quick to learn. Teaching your students how to properly execute the cues their horse was trained to is vital. Learning to take cues from the horse, to in essence "read" the horse by looking for subtle changes, is equally as important. When the relationship between rider and horse is adversarial, your job as a trainer gets much harder. You work hard to create a trusting relationship between horse and rider, where the rider is the leader and understands how to ask the horse to perform without pushing him around.

Even with the best riders, however, "life" can creep into the ring. When this happens, the rider's mind is focused elsewhere. Thoughts create reactions—physical changes—and these affect the nonverbal communication between horse and rider, often cost-

ing points and even ribbons; or just creating a really bad day in the training ring. Stress creates tension and stiffness, anger makes for more aggressive motions, and so on.

When life happens—divorce, a traffic ticket, an accident, illness, death of a loved one, failure on a test, or poor performance in a competition—the trainer's job is to get the rider's mind back in the game. Life happenings are all neutral until we label them. Only when we label those happenings positive or negative do they take

on a life of their own. Thankfully, we all have the innate ability to choose how we look at any given set of circumstances or events. In neuro-linguistic programming (NLP), we refer to *reframing* as that shifting of our perspective. When you shift your perspective, changing your approach, most likely the outcome will change as well.

It takes a level of mental toughness to set aside what is happening "back in the real world" and focus only on the task at hand. There are a number of ways to help your students develop the mental toughness necessary to stay focused every time they step into the ring.

First is the *cancel* technique to stop negative thoughts. The mental command of

"cancel" instructs the mind to stop that thought, opening the door to a new thought. The mind can only hold one thought at a time, so I instruct my clients to find something positive to think about; and if they have trouble with that, simply think of a purple elephant. The purple elephant is a mythical creature that the mind doesn't know what to do with, and it perfectly serves the purpose of shifting one's thoughts.

Second is an NLP technique called *anchoring* that creates a response through use of association. It is based on classical behavioral conditioning and involves creating a trigger that connects to a desired response. I have found that anchoring is the tool that creates the most powerful and lasting changes in my clients. This type of conditioning completely bypasses the conscious mind and creates an instant reaction. The conscious mind can't stop the reaction you've programmed. Anchors can be just about anything: a touch, a sight, a set of complex movements. The key is that the anchor is attached to a desired emotional response. For example, "when you take the reins, you immediately relax." Anchoring automatically brings the rider to a better state of mind—a state of mind that allows for proper cueing of the horse, which in turn creates a winning performance.

Here's what you can teach your students to do to create an anchor. First, have them figure out what they want their anchor to be. For instance, reins or saddle. Whatever they choose to use as their anchor, make sure that it is simple to use and uncomplicated to access. Then, while they are lying in bed at night, relaxing and breathing deeply, let them simply say to themselves, "The moment I touch the horn of my saddle (or reins, etc.), I feel instantly relaxed and focused." This is a form of self-hypnosis that works very well.

It is important that the affirmation is personal to your student, and to his or her specific situation. Have students write it out, so you can be sure to eliminate any negative

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Even with the best riders, however, "life" can creep into the ring.

Left. All-night turnout on a hillside pasture makes for healthy school horses and exquisite early-morning scenes like this. Jeff Aiken photo.

animal was more important than its age in predicting the number of missed work days.

Two other causes of school horse health problems were identified by the study—advancing age of the riding school manager and lack of experience of the riding instructors. The older the manager, the more health problems the school horses had. This finding should encourage us all to seek out the most current information about horse care and management practices and remain open-minded about their implementation.

Researchers found that the more experienced the riding instructors were, the fewer days the school horses had to take off from work for health reasons. Continuing education for instructors was identified as helpful in reducing the number of school horse health problems also.

So to safeguard the health of your valued and valuable school horses, keep yourself (and your staff) up-to-date on management practices, attend to your education as an instructor, pay special attention to the health care needs of your older horses, and most importantly, **turn them out** as much as possible. You'll see the results in fewer missed days of work, and better yet, happier horses. ■

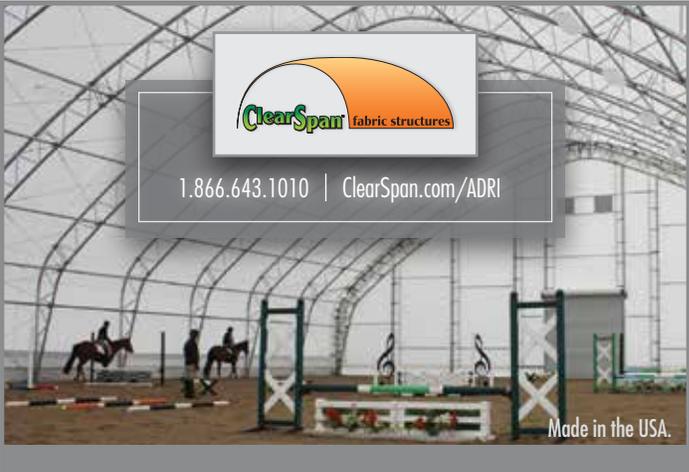
► *Sport Psychology, continued from page 6*

self-talk and clearly state the outcome they want as if it has already occurred—not that they “hope” or “wish” or “try” to do it. Once this is clearly written out, have them do this exercise 21 days in a row; and to compound the effect, have them tape it inside the trunk of the car, or some other place they see regularly.

Once they do this for the full 21 days, the programming will bypass the conscious mind and allow your student to leave life events outside the ring. Add this tool to your training toolbox, so you can always help your students be their best. ■



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*Source: American Farriers Journal, Jan/Feb 2015, Page 87.

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