



# Improve Your Riders' Performance by Changing Self-Talk

## NLP Tools Every Equestrian Trainer Should Be Using

*Laura King CHT, NLP, Life & Performance Coach*

As an equestrian trainer, you don't just teach position, timing, or technique. You shape mindset. Every day in your barn, riders are forming internal dialogue about themselves, their ability, their horse, and their future in the sport. Whether spoken aloud or not, that internal conversation directly affects performance.

The way a rider talks to themselves — and the way you speak to them — influences results just as much as physical training. This is where NLP, or Neuro-Linguistic Programming, becomes a powerful tool for trainers.

Neuro refers to the connection between mind and body. Linguistic refers to how lan-

guage shapes experience. Programming refers to the patterns we repeat — consciously or unconsciously — that create our results. In the equestrian world, those patterns are everywhere: the rider who says, "I always miss that distance," the junior who believes she isn't good under pressure, the amateur who thinks she just isn't brave enough.

Those thoughts are not harmless commentary; they are programming. And programming produces performance.

As trainers, you influence these patterns daily through correction, encouragement, tone of voice, body language, and expectation. When you understand NLP principles, you gain the ability to improve communication with students, reduce emotional reactivity in the ring, build confidence intentionally, shift negative patterns quickly, and create consistency under pressure. In short, you begin training the mind the same way you train the horse.

One of the foundational principles of NLP is that there is no failure, only feedback. A rail, a missed lead change, tension in the test — these are not failures. They are information. When trainers frame mistakes as feedback, riders stay open and solution-focused rather than defensive or discouraged. That shift in language alone builds braver competitors.

Another core concept is that everything that happens is neutral; meaning is assigned afterward. A spook, a chip, or a tough round carries no built-in emotional charge. It is the rider's interpretation that creates tension or composure. When a rider thinks, "I blew it," their body tightens and their horse feels it. When the same moment is reframed as "useful information," the nervous system stays steadier. Reframing perspective is one of the most valuable skills a trainer can model and teach.

NLP also teaches that the meaning of communication is the response you get. As trainers, your intention may be clear, but if a rider shuts down, becomes anxious, or loses confidence, the message did not land as intended. Effective coaching sometimes requires adjusting tone, timing, or wording until the desired response is achieved. It is often easier to change how we communicate than to try to change someone else.

Another powerful reminder is that the map is not the territory. Each rider brings their own

history, confidence level, and emotional lens to the arena. Two riders can have identical rounds and walk away with entirely different interpretations. Understanding this helps trainers individualize instruction instead of assuming every rider processes feedback the same way. Perception creates performance.

We also cannot not communicate. Riders constantly read your posture, breath, facial expression, and energy. Likewise, horses read riders in the same way. A trainer who understands this principle becomes more intentional about the emotional climate of the barn and warm-up ring.

Focus is another determining factor in outcome. What a rider concentrates on grows. If they focus on avoiding mistakes, they often find them. If they focus on rhythm, balance, and execution, performance stabilizes. Elite trainers deliberately guide attention toward what they want repeated, not what they want avoided.

In NLP, learning progresses through stages: unconscious incompetence, conscious incompetence, conscious competence, and finally unconscious competence. Every rider begins not knowing what they don't know. With instruction, they become aware of the gap. Through repetition and correction, they learn to perform correctly with effort. Ultimately, mastery becomes automatic. Peak performance occurs at that final stage, when skill and confidence operate fluidly without overthinking. Mental training accelerates this progression.

Finally, excellence leaves clues. If one rider can remain composed under pressure, others can learn to do the same. NLP offers tools such as modeling, anchoring confidence states, and structured mental rehearsal to help riders access their best state more consistently. These techniques are not abstract theory; they are practical skills that can be integrated into everyday training.

As trainers, you are not only developing rid-

ers' technical ability. You are shaping their self-image, their resilience, and their relationship with pressure. The language you use becomes the culture your riders perform within. When mental conditioning is woven into a training program, riders recover faster from mistakes, communicate better with their horses, and ride at their personal best more consistently.

Technical instruction builds skill. Mental training builds consistency. When both are developed together, performance rises naturally.

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### About the author:

**Laura King** is the Director and Founder of Summit Hypnosis and Wellness and is a Certified Hypnotist, NLP Practitioner, Life Coach, and Sports Performance Coach. Laura has written and published several books and workbooks, including "Power To Win" for equestrians and "Perfect Enough," a guide to help you evaluate your perceptions and experiences around vital areas of your life.