

CONCENTRATION AND MEMORIZATION

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One of the most common reasons dressage riders seek out my services as a Sport Psychologist is to improve their ability to retain focus and concentration throughout a competitive performance.

There are many things that can interfere with attaining a quiet, focused mind. Some people find this state quite naturally, but for many it is a learned skill that can be achieved through practice.

There are several different ways to lose your focus. Here are a couple of common traps. See if you can identify which is most likely for you.

- The Over Analyzer- If you are an Over Analyzer then you think too much. When riding in a state of focus, the rider should have a few focal thoughts, but these thoughts are balanced with a lot of images, and a trust in your “feel”. Too much thinking in the left side of the brain can block the right brain’s body intelligence from full expression. The Over Analyzer needs to learn to condense their analysis into a few key words, and then allow their body’s innate intelligence to express itself.
- The Distractor- Last week I worked with a rider who was extremely distracted. She was aware of everything going on around her competitive arena. She saw children playing on a nearby lawn, she noticed the grounds keeper emptying the garbage cans, and a horse in the warm-up misbehaving. This lack of focus on her test meant that she was attending to neither her pattern, nor the quality of her horse’s work. Her lack of focus also meant that her horse tended to become distracted. This led to a vicious circle where she began to look for possible distractions that might upset her horse, which meant she was not attending to her horse’s level of connection, which meant her horse was more easily distracted!
- The Under Thinker- The Under Thinker relies too much on natural ability and feel, and does not fully utilize their ability to plan and strategize. It is wonderful to have a natural ability to “feel”, but there is more you can do to prepare for a competitive performance.
- The Blank Slate- The Blank Slate has all the best intentions to prepare for competition. Unfortunately all their training goes out the window once the bell rings. There are few dressage experiences more horrifying than realizing you have no idea where you are or what you are supposed to be doing. This person often experiences performance anxiety. When the brain feels this anxiety, it immediately reverts to a primitive state. All intelligent thought shuts down as the brain withdraws to its more primitive brain centers. Your body prepares for fight or flight and immediately forgets the dressage test you have so diligently studied.
- Focus Fatigue- Even the best riders in the world struggle to maintain their focus. The brain is like a muscle. It must be trained to retain focus for long periods of time, despite the stress and pressure of competition.

As you can see, there are many different reasons why a rider may lack focus. However there are some common solutions which are helpful to many people.

- Learn the role of left brain thinking, versus right brain thinking. Though this is a bit of oversimplification, the left brain is responsible for analytical thinking, while the right brain is responsible for “feel”. Both play an important role in test preparation.
- Study your test using a variety of different senses. Write it down, walk through it, say it, or visualize it in your mind. If you are an Over Analyzer than work with imagery and visualization. If you are an Under Thinker then make your analytical mind work, and write it out. If you are a Blank Slate then practice under pressure. Perform in front of a friend or instructor.

The goal is to achieve a state of Flow. In Flow, or a peak performance state, the rider is completely in the moment. They are unaware of any distractions, and feel completely at one with the horse. Actions may feel effortless and spontaneous and thoughts are few but very focal. Your thoughts should become like laser beams, very intense. Mostly you must ride from the right brain’s body intelligence, or “feel”. The right brain holds the instinctive knowledge that gifts us with the delicacy of intuition and timing required for a top performance.

This is a complex subject, and in fact I have just written a book on this topic. It is called “Memorize That Dressage Test: A workbook of mental games to improve focus and Flow”. If you’re interested please look at my web site, where you can purchase the book. My web site seanaadamson.com.

If you have any questions or comments please feel free to contact me at seanaadams@aol.com. I enjoy hearing from you!