

PERFORMANCE ANXIETY

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Question: I can never seem to bring my best performance when the pressure is on. Nothing terrible happens, but I never feel as fluid as when I'm riding at home. Help!

Answer: In dressage we are constantly striving for a perfection that is impossible to achieve. When riding under that kind of performance pressure it is very easy to start over thinking your performance, rather than letting your instinctive, deeply learned skills flow naturally. Your problem is a very common one. Some of the best professional athletes in the world struggle with this very issue. Fortunately there are some strategies you can use to help speed up your learning process. First you need some information about how the brain works.

The brain has two distinct halves. Though I'm oversimplifying a bit, the left side of the brain is the analytical side. It is logical, sequential, and verbal. It holds the language centers. The right brain is the intuitive side. It thinks in images and sensations. The right brain is instinctive, and can automatically access any deeply learned skill.

With a high technique sport such as dressage, the temptation is to over analyze and use too much of the left brain, where analytical thinking occurs. The loud chatter of the left brain can block the right brain's quiet, subtle ability to work in an instinctive and fluid way.

In a recent golf study, experienced players were asked to spend five minutes explaining their putting technique before they made a stroke. Their performance declined dramatically. The analytical left brain blocked the instinctive, natural body intelligence of the right brain. Studies have shown that the opposite is true for beginners. Beginners perform better if they think about at least a few details. But once you have enough experience to have some deeply ingrained knowledge, over thinking your technique can have a negative effect on performance.

The left brain is great for learning. It allows us to organize information in an orderly way. This is essential. But when it comes to performing, the most fluid performance lives primarily in the right brain's ability to ride from "feel". Here are some specific ways to stay more in your "right mind".

- Have a routine you follow both in your warm-up and in competition. When you follow a routine your actions become more automatic. For instance, have an automatic plan for how to prepare your horse for a pirouette or a line of changes. Know what feeling you want to create with your horse.
- Keep your focus on what you want, rather than what you do not want.
- Think in images rather than words. Instead of running through a mental checklist, simply imagine how you would like the perfect shoulder-in to feel.
- Learn visualization skills, and make visualization a regular part of your mental practice. When you visualize, you directly engage the right brain, and by pass the left brain.
- Imagine you are riding in an exhibition, rather than a competition.

- Learn any type of meditative practice. Meditation teaches “meta-thinking”, or the science of thinking about how you are thinking!
- Practice makes perfect! Embrace any challenge that puts you in a high pressure situation. The more experience you get performing under pressure, the easier it gets. Eventually you will learn to stay in your “right mind”!

Look for my next article which will describe Visualization Skills and Self-Hypnosis. These skills should be very helpful. If you would like an in depth description of brain function and visualization see my new book, “Memorize That Dressage Test”. It can be found on my web site, seanaadamson.com.