

YOUNG RIDER EQUESTRIAN SPORT PSYCHOLOGY: *PRESSURE PROOF YOUR RIDING!*

When you want to pull your hair out but your helmet gets in the way...mental coaching can help!

BY DANIEL STEWART



Equestrian sport psychology can help riders of all levels and ages regardless of whether you are recreational or competitive. Many trainers introduce mental coaching to riders as young as seven or eight because they know the sooner they plant seeds of confidence and focus, the greater chance they will have of growing. Teach the young rider to think positively, manage stress, build confidence, set attainable goals, handle pressure, and control show jitters early, and there is a great chance they will become confident and successful riders later.

I'VE LOST MY MIND AND I THINK MY HORSE TOOK IT!

Young rider sport psychology is a form of preventative medicine because it teaches them to avoid developing negative emotions like fear of failure, show-jitters, and perfectionism before they even happen. We were only born with two fears: the fear of falling and the fear of loud noises. We have learned all the others, including the fear of failure and the fear of not being perfect! Introducing mental coaching at a young age is a sure way of giving the young rider a confident head start on their riding careers.

When a young rider waits too long to introduce mental exercises into their training program, it becomes more like corrective medicine, breaking bad habits (like fear of failure, show-jitters, and perfectionism) after they have already happened, and then replacing them with positive alternatives like confidence and self-esteem. While it is never too late to start a sport psychology program, most trainers agree that the earlier the better. The motto "just do it" works well for those getting an early start, but "just undo it" usually does a better job of describing those who get a late start.



Daniel Stewart is an expert on not only riding instruction, but rider psychology as well.

BIG SHOTS ARE JUST LITTLE SHOTS WHO KEPT ON SHOOTING

We ride for many reasons. In the beginning, it is usually for the love of the horse (wanting to spend every second with that big furry butthead who just rubbed you off on that fence post!), but in time it often changes to challenging ourselves in the competitive arena. A lot of research has been done to determine just why young athletes do what they do, and the results might surprise you:

- 1) To have fun.
- 2) To learn new skills.
- 3) To be with friends and make new friends.
- 4) To belong to a group/team and be accepted.
- 5) To experience competition and challenge themselves.
- 6) To experience success and winning.
- 7) To exercise and be healthy.

Enjoyment, skill acquisition, and being social have consistently been the top three motivators for young riders. This is not to say that competitive spirit, winning, and success are not important; they are aspects they mention, but they usually fall between sixth and tenth on their list of main motivations. Recognizing this need for fun, skill development, and socialization is an important step in creating the Young Riders Program because as soon as they start having fun, getting stronger, and fitting in, their drive for competition and success comes naturally. Sixty percent of youngsters drop out of sports by the age of 13 because it is no longer fun. That is how important fun is to them!

The U.S. Pony Club created a very successful program based on this model of enjoyment, hard work, and social interaction/teamwork (in addition to knowledge, stable management, and mentoring). They also teach the importance of skill development and a healthy competitive spirit. The result has been the development of many of the world's greatest eventers!

THERE IS NOT A MENTAL COACHING PROGRAM FOR ALL RIDERS... THERE IS A MENTAL COACHING PROGRAM FOR EACH RIDER

Like a fingerprint, no two young riders are completely alike. Each one is unique in many ways, and this often makes it difficult to build the perfect mental training program. Luckily, most youngsters develop in a few relatively predictable ways which can help shed some light on how to create a general sport psychology program for a barn full of young riders.

- Children under the age of ten spend much of their time figuring out how to get along with others and learning how to interact with authority figures other than their parents (like their trainers). Enjoyment, exploration, and developing the love of riding are key elements at this age (not winning or losing).
- Tweens face the new challenge of trying to gain respect and acceptance from their peers. Social interaction is very important as they want very badly to be part of a group and fit in. Thoughts of boyfriends/girlfriends and of developing a same-sex best friend dominate much of this stage.
- Adolescents spend a great deal of their time developing their identity. From the clothes they wear to the music they listen to, they start to define who they are. This is the phase when most young riders make the transition in identity from "I ride horses" to "I'm an equestrian." It is now that riding usually becomes a significant piece of their identity.

FOR THE PARENTS

Bringing young riders up without putting them down.

As a parent, your job is multi-faceted and you need to wear many different hats. In addition to groom, hauler, and chief boot-polisher, you are also there to enjoy your children, foster their growth, enhance their lives, facilitate fun, help them learn, and keep them safe. You need

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to be supportive without being overly involved and help them set goals without making them your own.

Non-parents might think the job of a horse-mom/dad is a rather straightforward one: support your children and keep out of the trainer's way. While this is certainly true, it only describes the part-time job of a young rider parent. Their full-time job is to be enthusiastic yet calming, supportive yet invisible, critical yet nurturing, loving yet pushing, and caring yet demanding, all while keeping out of the trainer's way. Being a horse-parent is hard!

HONEY-DO AND HONEY-DON'T LISTS FOR PARENTS

While there is not a right or wrong way to parent, the following dos and don'ts might bring a little sanity to the craziness that can surround being a horse parent:

DO...

- Be interested, supportive, light-hearted, and understanding.
- Teach your young rider to enjoy themselves and have fun.
- Include some social interaction in their riding program.
- Teach them to respect their trainers by respecting them yourself (no coaching from the sidelines!).
- Find coachable moments (like good sportsmanship) and use them as life lessons.
- Allow your child to make mistakes. They are learning opportunities (not missed opportunities) and if they don't make them, they cannot learn from them.

DON'T...

- Never blame the tack, trainer, judge, weather, etc., when things don't go according to your child's plan. Teach them to become accountable by owning the bad as well as the good.
- Studies show that youngsters like it when their parents provide support but not when they give technical advice (unless the parents are very advanced riders).

Once again, no coaching from the sidelines!

- Avoid TMTS (too much too soon). Introduce sport psychology slowly. Sometimes the harder you push new ideas and concepts on the young rider, the harder they push back.

- Be careful using labels.

Introducing your daughter as Miss Perfect could place unintentional pressure on her to live up to the label.

- Never confuse winning and self-worth. Love and be proud of your young rider unconditionally!

PRaise AND THE YOUNG RIDER: TURNING COMPLIMENTS INTO CONFIDENCE

Praise following an accomplishment or goal can be very rewarding—as long as it is well-deserved. Young riders tend to underestimate risks and overestimate rewards but still have a hunger for something called realistic evaluation, or praise that is well-deserved and sincere. Unfortunately, when they receive praise that is not deserved or not based on a specific goal or achievement, it loses much of its meaning and no longer acts as a motivator or reward.

The young rider also seems to accept praise best when it is somewhat infrequent. Continuous praise seems to desensitize the rider to its message and lower its value, while specific and infrequent praise helps the rider learn exactly what skills allowed them to succeed (or not). In addition, continuous praise also seems to decrease motivation (why try hard if they always do well?) while infrequent praise, along with periodic constructive criticism, conveys the message that they are doing well but there is still plenty more for them to learn. Measure success by the effort you gave, not just the score you got!

An interesting method of delivering productive praise is called sandwiching. Instead of delivering praise alone, sandwich a piece of constructive criticism between two pieces of praise. In this way,

the young rider develops self-esteem and pride but still understands that there is room for improvement. The phrase, "You had great focus on course today. You were still a little tense in the start box, but you finished strong and I'm proud of you" is an example of how praise delivers the reward, but it is the criticism sandwiched in the middle that is actually the most constructive.

Lastly, praise should always focus on measurable and repeatable skills the rider has control over. If they are praised in a way that says, "You did well because you're so talented" they might actually consider avoiding future challenges because, "If I don't do well next time, does that mean I'm no longer talented?" Changing this kind of praise to, "You did well today because you stayed focused and hit your distances" emphasizes skills the rider had control over and can recreate in the future.

FOR THE COACHES

Never expect young riders to be more excited about learning than you are about teaching.

Young riders set lofty physical goals and dedicate a great deal of time to achieving them. With this in mind, trainers should introduce a mental coaching program slowly and in a manageable way so that it does not interfere with the rider's current lesson program. If it is introduced too quickly, without proper explanation, and takes time away from riding, there is a very good chance the young rider will push back against it.

The world's greatest riders respect the importance of goals, focus, and confidence, but they never forget the importance of developing good physical skills and position as well. It is, therefore, best to limit new mental coaching exercises to no more than about an hour a week (split into four 15-minute sessions) in the beginning. Once the young rider begins to feel the benefits of mental training without being overwhelmed by it, the trainer can then slowly start to increase the duration and demands of their sport psychology program.

TEACH THE YOUNG RIDERS TO ALWAYS GET UP, NEVER GIVE UP

Mentally and physically, young riders go through some pretty big changes and challenges. Not only are they growing physically, they are also struggling with new feelings and emotions related to things like having a first boyfriend, learning to drive, fitting in socially, and mixing their love of riding with a competitive desire to be successful. Add to this the pressure of trying to live up to the expectations of others (i.e., parents and coaches) and dealing with the potential of looking bad in front of their peers (the fear of failure), and the young rider can be left feeling a bit overwhelmed. It is now that confidence and self-esteem building exercises should be introduced. Not just so that they can learn to handle the pressure of riding and showing, but so that they can also learn to handle the demands of life in general.

Many young riders incorrectly base their self-worth on the amount of their show success alone and forget to factor in things like their progress, skill improvement, and achievement of their goals. Reminding the young rider to judge themselves on the effort they gave rather than the ribbon they got is very important. Providing them with leadership and mentoring opportunities (like teaching at a riding camp) is yet another way to strengthen their self-confidence, self-respect, and self-esteem.

CARING COACHES

Each and every trainer is unique and different in their own special way. They are arguably some of the hardest working professionals in any sport, and while there is no right or wrong way to coach, those who create the best young riders always seem to be the ones who C.A.R.E. the most.

Consistent – Young riders thrive under consistent guidance and rules (even though they may not admit it). Setting and maintaining a short list of non-negotiable yet fair rules (like arriving on time) and consequences (like cleaning the tack room if they are late) eliminates any guesswork

and creates a sense of self-respect and responsibility.

Action – Young riders have a pretty short attention span, so keeping them constantly moving and engaged helps them stay focused. Allowing a little time for discussion (mutual collaboration instead of simply always being told what to do and think) also creates helpful shifts in attention and serves as a great measuring stick for how much the young rider actually understands.

Reinforce – Specific and immediate feedback should be given when a young rider improves or masters a skill. The same rule applies for when they make mistakes. A slightly positive balance between compliments and constructive criticism enhances learning and creates mutual respect between rider and coach while constant praise (like always saying “good”) actually lessens it.

Experiment – Young riders crave diversity, so allowing them to



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experiment with new schooling techniques and strategies helps them scratch their creative itch. Along with this comes an even greater chance of making mistakes but much learning occurs through them. When a rider avoids pushing too hard (staying in their comfort zone), they will make fewer mistakes but also learn less. As long as mistakes are framed as lessons learned, the rider can figure out what caused them, how to improve them, and eventually learn to worry less about making them in the future.

FOR THE YOUNG RIDERS

What lies in front of you and what lies behind you pales in comparison to what lies inside of you!

Maintaining a strong focus on your riding at a time when life seems to be throwing curveballs at you (usually in the form of school and social demands) can be a bit challenging, but there are plenty of tips, tools, and techniques you can use to remain confident, focused, and successful.

Before building your mental training program you must first figure out who exactly you are. Are you goal-oriented or do you find goals tedious? Do you tend to be positive or do you usually focus on the negative? Do you remember what you have learned or does pressure make your forgetful? Do you laugh and smile when showing or do you get a little gloomy? Defining who you are (called cognitive appraisal) is the first step in building any sport psychology program. Be yourself...everyone else is taken.

Goals, positive-thinking, focus, and enjoyment all lead to success, but only if you use them in a way that makes sense to you. Creating an age appropriate mental training program ensures that your mental tools and techniques will be successful. Below are four examples of how you can build a program by taking into consideration the unique nature of young riders.

1) Goal-Setting Poster vs. Goal-Setting Journal

Adult riders often keep a goal-setting journal so they can monitor their progress towards important goals. Ask a young rider to keep one and their response is often, "I don't have the time" or "It's just not for me." Young riders understand the importance of goals, but often find that writing them down is not very interesting or stimulating. When this is the case, a goal-setting poster can serve as a great alternative to the journal.

A goal-setting poster is a visually stimulating reminder of a rider's goals. If their goal is to move up to Preliminary, they can make a poster containing different forms of visual motivators like photos of them schooling a Prelim question; a magazine photo of their favorite rider going Prelim; a quote from an Olympian about moving-up; the name of a horse trials where they aspire to complete their first Prelim; and a motivating motto printed in big, bold font. Once the poster is finished, they can hang it somewhere they will see often like in their tack room or in their truck as they drive to the venue.

2) Positive Affirmation Sentences vs. Positive Affirmation Songs

Look at the world's greatest athletes (like Olympic swimmer Michael Phelps) and you will likely notice that

many of them have something in common; they use music to pump themselves up or calm themselves down prior to a competition. Using music motivation to create arousal, focus, and control emotions has gained a great deal of respect lately. So at a time when oldsters like to tell youngsters to turn their music down, perhaps—just for now—we might want to listen to the sport psychology experts who are telling athletes to turn their music up!

Allowing a young rider to listen to motivating songs prior to a show (changing positive affirmation sentences into positive affirmation songs) is one way of building a mental training program around the nature of young riders. If the rider listens to their pre-competition playlist often enough, they might even get some of their songs stuck in their head. Since these songs create motivation and arousal, this is the one time you actually want it stuck there! Here are a few examples of positive affirmations that come from some popular adolescent songs:

- “You can be the greatest / You can be the best / You can be the King Kong banging on your chest” -The Script
- “The struggles I’m facing / The chances I’m taking / Sometimes might knock me down / But no, I’m not breaking” -Miley Cyrus
- “When you’re doing what you’re doing / Are you just getting by? / You’ve gotta [sic] get up and try, and try, and try” -Pink
- “Don’t hide yourself in regret / Just love yourself and you’re set / You’re on the right track baby” -Lady Gaga

3) Repetition vs. Wordplay

Young riders can be very creative and like to look for stimulating ways to remember important lessons learned. Learning through repetition is effective, but it often lacks the spark needed to capture the attention of young riders. A great way to make learning more interesting and stimulating is to use pneumonic devices

like acronyms, rhymes, and alliteration.

- Acronyms like BLAST (breathe, laugh, and smile today), STAR (sit tall and relax) and BEST (balance every single transition) keep the young rider’s mind focused on productive tasks.
- Rhyming mottos like “Keep calm and ride on,” “If it’s going to be, it’s up to me,” “Push on, finish strong,” and “We’re better together” help the young rider stay focused under pressure.
- Alliterations like “I’m calm, cool, collected, cheerful, confident, competent, creative, courageous, and centered” remind the young rider that they are in control and capable.

4) Enjoyment vs. Overly Seriousness

It is pretty clear that young riders need to experience some degree of fun and enjoyment if they are going to consistently ride up to their potential. This does not mean that they are not taking things seriously; they are just making sure that emotions like frustration, sadness, regret, and general crankiness don’t interfere with their ability to succeed.

When a young rider has difficulty enjoying their ride, techniques like tough acting (fake happiness until you make happiness) and strategic laughter (laughing on purpose even without

cause) can help. Research has proven that people don’t just laugh because they are happy, they are also happy because they laugh! It is important to remember that this is not the kind of laughter that delivers the message, “I don’t care.” It is the kind of laughter that says, “In order to ride my best I need to feel my best, and enjoying myself helps me do that.”

Young riders laugh up to 400 times a day. Adults laugh an average of 17. Perhaps we don’t stop laughing because we get old, maybe we get old because we stop laughing!

THE ONLY RIDER YOU NEED TO BE BETTER THAN TODAY IS THE RIDER YOU WERE YESTERDAY!

Regardless of whether you are a coach, parent, or young rider, a little confidence and focus training can go a long way. Learn to become the mentally strong and confident rider who always gets up instead of gives up, who is never satisfied until you go from ordinary to extraordinary, and who is able to change pressure packed into pressure proof. Remember, the promise of tomorrow lies in the hands of the promising young riders of today! 🐾

Professional Bio

Daniel Stewart has been a successful international trainer and instructor for over 25 years. In addition to the U.S., he has trained riders in Spain, Portugal, Canada, Mexico, Switzerland, Belgium, United Arab Emirates, Greece, and the West Indies. From 1999 to 2007, he coached riders on several U.S. Equestrian Teams at World Championships, World Equestrian Games, and Olympics. As the internationally acclaimed author of the equestrian sport psychology book “*Pressure Proof Your Riding*” and the rider fitness book “*Ride Right*,” he is widely considered one of the world’s leading experts on equestrian sport psychology and performance. He teaches clinics and seminars to thousands of riders each year, is a regular guest speaker at national conventions, has been the subject of countless magazine and newspaper articles, and is the equestrian sport psychology expert for the Horse Radio Network and many equestrian websites. He lived in Andalusia, Spain until recently but now resides in Naples, Florida, where he teaches private SKYPE sport psychology sessions and certifies riders online to teach equestrian sport psychology and rider fitness classes when not traveling to teach equestrian sport psychology seminars and clinics. Order an autographed copy of his new book on equestrian sport psychology, *Pressure Proof Your Riding*, from his website www.stewartclinics.com.