PERFECT MIND: PERFECT RIDE

Sport Psychology for Successful Riding

INGA WOLFRAMM

Foreword by Mary King MBE

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There is freedom waiting for you,
On the breezes of the sky,
And you ask “What if I fall?”
Oh but my darling,
What if you fly?

by Erin Hanson
How do you become a successful rider? I’ve been asked this question many times and it’s never easy to come up with an answer. The rider, the horse, the training, the facilities, the support team – eventually all these elements need to come together to form a whole.

And yet, I’m convinced that it all starts with the rider. First and foremost, riders must want to be around horses and do their best for them. If they want to go all the way, riders have to live and breathe the sport. Looking back at my own life as a rider, I’ve been passionate about horses for as long as I can remember and I never wanted to do anything else. Working with young horses, bringing them on, step by step, and developing their talents so that one day, maybe, I’m able to compete with them at the highest level, that’s a real privilege and one I wouldn’t give up for the world. What is more, I believe that if my horses are happy, if they enjoy their work, trust in me as their rider and have been brought on to cope with what’s ahead, they’ll end up showing their true potential.

As a result, I believe that, as riders, we’ll need to work on ourselves, every second of every day. Being patient and remaining calm and quiet at all times, regardless of whether we’re going for a hack around the block or are about to perform at a major competition, whether we’re at the top of our game or things aren’t working out quite the way we’d hoped. Anyone who wants to get to the top of their chosen discipline will have to deal with the inevitable highs and lows. They are all part of the experience: one day you’ll win an event and the next you’ll hit the deck.

In my mind, in order to cope with the uncertainties, the ups and downs, with the successes and failures, with winning and losing, you first of all should know what you want. You should have a dream and be single-minded about achieving it. When I look back at my own career, I can honestly say that I’ve always been exceedingly determined. I don’t think I would have got to this level if I didn’t have this drive to win. But I am also very calm and very level headed with an even temperament. There’s no point in getting cross or upset when things go wrong; you’re going to have to, quite literally, ride out whatever is thrown in your path.
In my view, those are also key skills when it comes to dealing with the pressure of competing. Lots of riders feel nervous before an important event, but it’s how you deal with those pre-competitive flutters that is going to make the difference. In order to be able to do what you have to do you’ll have to learn to control that anxiety. You’ll need to develop a system that works for you. To me, being very organised helps. On the morning of a cross-country day, I want to be sure that I’ve got everything in place, that I’ve got my clothes, my stop watch, everything in piles, so I know that there’s no panic at the last minute. Then I like to do the last course walk on my own, making up my mind how I am going to ride it. I always keep my thoughts positive, and see myself doing well in my mind’s eye.

But even if things end up going wrong or you’ve made a mistake, don’t get hung up about it. Once again, it’s part and parcel of the sport. It is how you deal with these situations that is going to determine whether you’ll end up doing well or whether you’ll fall to pieces. It’s essential not to dwell on what has happened. Instead, act on the reason why the mistake happened, focus on what’s ahead and carry on positively.

It all comes down to this: as riders, we need to be in control of ourselves, of our thoughts and emotions, at all times. We need to be in control of our minds. Only then can we be in control of our bodies too, and ride our horses in the way they deserve to be ridden.

This book will help you to achieve just that. It’ll teach you the mental attitudes and skills you need to become the very best you can be. It’ll help you achieve the ‘perfect mind’ for a ‘perfect ride’.

Mary King, Olympic three-day eventer
PART I

ATTITUDES THAT KEEP YOU GOING
It’s the year 1991, a few days after the four-star eventing competition at Burghley, UK. A 23-year old Pippa Nolan eagerly rifles through the pages of the British magazine Horse & Hound. For the first time she’d competed two horses at that level and she’s hoping for glowing reviews of her fourth and fourteenth place. Imagine her disappointment when she’s greeted by the following comment by Captain Mark Phillips, former Olympian and eventing aficionado:

‘…two young ladies (referring to Pippa Nolan and Lucinda Murray) who won’t be reliable at top level until they go back to basics and learn to ride across country properly.’

What a blow to a young rider’s confidence.

Fast forward to 2003, and Pippa Nolan, now Pippa Funnell, becomes the first – and only rider to date! – to win the Rolex Grand Slam; a feat that involves winning not one, but the three consecutive four-star events: Kentucky, Badminton and Burghley. Since that fateful comment twelve years ago, Pippa Funnell has turned herself into one of the best eventing riders in the world.

How did she do it? At the heart of her success lies a combination of talent, incredibly hard work, commitment to the sport, believing in herself, perseverance in the face of failure and coping under pressure. In a word, Pippa Funnell became mentally tough. She learned how to use mental skills to tremendous effect.

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As a result, Pippa Funnell has been one of the most vocal riders about the value of sport psychology throughout much of her career, crediting much of her success to the honing of her mental skills. In her autobiography, she sums up the problem – as well as the solution.

‘One of the conditions for receiving Lottery money is that riders are expected to take advice from specially appointed people like nutritionists, physiotherapists – and sport psychologists. (…) Sport psychology was pretty new then (ed: 1998) and most riders felt it was completely unnecessary; in fact all my friends thought it was hideously embarrassing and gave it a wide berth. But I wasn’t embarrassed; I just pricked up my ears. I have always been open-minded to suggestions because I feel that if anything, however minute, can help me, it’s a bonus.’

And what a bonus it turned out to be.

Over the past few decades researchers have shown in literally hundreds of studies that (sport) psychological concepts such as self-confidence, the ability to perform under pressure, handle setbacks effectively, commitment and perseverance are important contributors to competitive performance. Those performers (riders), who are able to hold it together mentally when the pressure is on almost always end up on top. What is more – and despite what many riders still think – the level someone rides at doesn’t even come into it.

Surprised? Don’t be.

You see, it’s like this: regardless of whether you’re just starting out or are a seasoned professional, the idea of proving your worth in front of any kind of audience, at an event, a show, or even at home, can be nerve-wracking.

The reasons are straightforward enough. In competition, you and a bunch of other riders are thrown into the ring together and expected to battle it out to see who comes out on top. But even if you’re ‘only’
riding at home, the moment someone decides to stand next to the arena to watch, they’re highly likely to have an opinion of how you’re doing. And then there’s you. You’ve invested so much time, effort and money into the sport. You’ve sacrificed other areas of your life, be that school, friends, recreational activities or even a steady relationship for the sake of that one, all-consuming love. Your horses and your sport. Now you want to prove it hasn’t been for nothing. Never mind how much pleasure you derive from being with your horse, from training and riding every day, deep down, you still want other people to approve of what you’re doing. You want external validation – and a sure-fire way to get it is to do well in competition (or to have lots of people telling you that you’re amazing).

And yet… competing (or strutting your stuff in front of an audience) can also be fun. In fact, it can be so exhilarating, that it becomes (almost) addictive. That feeling of you and your horse giving it your all, stretching yourself further than you ever have before, working as a team, a unit, as one. When it all comes together, it’s incredible.

If it all comes together.

This is where sport psychology can make a real difference. Suddenly, training the mind becomes as important as training your horse, no matter whether you’re a beginner or one of the world’s best.

Making sure everything does come together depends in no small part on whether you, as a rider, are tough enough. Mentally tough enough.

Several groups of researchers, among them Professor Graham Jones, founding member of British consultancy firm Lane4, have tried to define this concept called mental toughness. In their eyes it’s a psychological edge, that is either inborn or developed over time and that enables athletes to cope better than others with the stresses of sporting life: poor or outstanding performance in competition, being put under pressure by peers, trainers, the press, injury, setbacks in training, an isolating lifestyle. Due to their ability to cope, mentally tough athletes are generally more consistent than others when it comes to motivation, determination, confidence and keeping control under pressure.3

In essence, what Jones and his colleagues are saying is that individuals who embrace the stressors of competitive sports end up outperforming their peers – not because they're necessarily more skilled or talented, but because they thrive on the demands of competitive life.

By now, top riders around the world are beginning to realise the importance of developing the right kind of attitudes and mental skills – and grassroots or amateur riders might wish to heed their words.

US dressage rider Catherine Haddad, who has numerous national and international Grand Prix wins to her name, firmly believes that training your mind is essential in any campaign to become a top class rider:

‘You are not going to get anywhere without relevant mental skills. Really, you’re talking about different kinds of skills (…) But the ability to maintain a positive attitude and to brush off setbacks and to remain tenacious that is something you need over the long run. That is something you need every day.’

Let’s be honest. Phrases such as ‘maintaining a positive attitude’, ‘brushing off setbacks’ and ‘remaining tenacious’ sound much more convincing coming from a top class rider than if delivered in a scientific paper. Partly, that’s because it comes from real-life experience. And partly, it’s because we admire those who’ve risen to the top of the equestrian tree – and wouldn’t mind emulating them…

But just in case you’re not convinced, listen to the words of dressage rider Wayne Channon. He represented Britain in both the 2005 European Championships and 2006 World Equestrian Games, and is convinced that the mind really matters:

‘Everybody I know in the top of the sport, when they get on their horse, they are totally focused. They prepare themselves, and they work really hard at concentrating on what they are doing. This is crucial; you can’t do it without that. If riders don’t have the

necessary mental skills, they need to get them, as without them they can’t go to the top.”

If you still don’t believe it, this is what one of the world’s most accomplished Dutch dressage riders, Adelinde Cornelissen, thinks:

‘Talent is not where you’re going to make the difference in competition anymore. If you want to win, you need to have the full package. You need to be mentally and physically at the top. That’s where all the little percentages can be gained in competition.’

Surely that should do it!

The message couldn’t be clearer: acquiring the right type of mental skills is an important step on the road towards optimal performance.

In order to be the best you can be, it’s not enough to ride well. It’s also not enough to work incredibly hard. In order to excel as a rider, you’re going to have to be able to control your mind, and your body, your thoughts and your emotions, wherever you are and in whatever situation. What is more, you must learn to like, or even love, the pressure that goes hand in hand with competition and the all-consuming lifestyle of owning horses. At the same time, as you embrace stress and learn to reinterpret it as something positive, you’ll also need to come up with your own definition of success, otherwise you’ll run yourself into the ground. Then you’ll have to try and cope with all the obstacles life as a rider throws at you and in your way. Luckily, there’ll be those to help and support you – but you’ve got to find them first. Most importantly, you’ll need to figure out who you want to be. Every day, you’ll have to believe that you’ll get there one day.

Sounds difficult? Yes, it does.

And yet, there are riders out there who are doing it. Meaning it is possible.


6 Ashton, R. (2014), Adelinde Cornelissen, this quote is from an article that first appeared in the May 2014 issue of Dressage Today magazine (DressageToday.com)
Right? Right! Take heart, then, and read on.

Developing the right kind of mental attitude, skills and routines that’ll help you achieve optimal mental control isn’t magic. These attributes can be learned, just like the technical skills of riding a horse.

That’s what the following pages aim to do: teach you how to be mentally tough. How to be in control.

You’ll learn how to define success for yourself, so that the ever increasing pressure from those around you doesn’t hold as much sway anymore – or how to cope with the inevitable ups and downs of a (competitive) lifestyle with horses; how to believe in who you are and how to stay committed to your own journey towards success – or how to avoid self-sabotaging yourself just when things start to go well. Then there are the practical elements of mapping out your journey using the most effective goal-setting techniques. You’ll be shown how to keep cool under pressure, how to reframe your thoughts to put you in an optimum frame of mind, how to keep focusing on the things that matter most, how to use visualisation to best effect and how to develop the kind of mental routines that give you confidence. Lastly, you’ll be given tips on how to optimise your mental preparation on the weeks and days leading up to a show, how to make the most of the day itself, and how to evaluate things effectively once it’s all over.

Most importantly though, adopting the right kind of attitude and developing effective mental skills will allow you to grow as a rider, improve the relationship with your horse and maximise your own performance in (and out of) the saddle.

Put simply, this book helps you achieve the perfect mind for a perfect ride.
KNOW WHO YOU ARE – 
AND BELIEVE IN IT

I set myself three goals in dressage when I was 20. I wanted to ride on the team with Carl; I wanted to ride at Olympia Horse Show – I’d sat in the grandstands as a teenager thinking this is the best place in the world to ride; and I wanted to compete in the Olympics.’

Charlotte Dujardin

Then, it was a childhood dream. Now, it has become reality. Charlotte Dujardin, Olympic Champion, World Champion, European Champion, World Number One, World Cup Champion, record holder in the Grand Prix, the Grand Prix Special and the Freestyle – there’s hardly a competitive title in the sport of dressage that this young lady hasn’t won. And she managed to achieve it all on top of the ‘other’ wonder horse, the dark brown Dutch warmblood gelding Valegro, jointly owned by her mentor Carl Hester and Roly Luard.

While the story of Charlotte and Valegro is, of course, the most exceptional of fairy tales that will fuel the dreams of thousands of pony-mad girls all over the world, many top riders have a similar story to tell. Most – if not all – of them talk of one fateful horse, that either propelled them into the ranks of equestrian legends or even granted them lifetime membership. Think of John Whitaker and Milton, of Anky van Grunsven and Salinero, think of Ludger Beerbaum and Ratina Z, or Isabell Werth and Gigolo, think of Meredith Michaels-Beerbaum and Shutterfly or

Charlotte Dujardin, the girl on the dancing horse, determined to stay No 1’, The Daily Telegraph. html: http://www.telegraph.co.uk/sport/olympics/equestrianism/10831210/Charlotte-Dujardin-the-girl-on-the-dancing-horse-determined-to-stay-No-1.html

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Sir Mark Todd and Charisma, think of Pippa Funnell and Supreme Rock, or Mary King and King William. And, lest we forget, think of Edward Gal and the original black wonder horse Totilas…

Especially these days, the breakthrough at the very top simply isn’t possible without a talented horse. After all, by its very definition equestrian sport depends on the four-legged athlete as much as the two-legged one (as well as on quite a few other things, some of which we’ll be discussing in the course of this book).

But the question is, did Charlotte know she’d be an Olympic Champion when she first sat on Valegro? Did Anky have an inkling of the successes she’d achieve with Salinero? Was Pippa Funnell able to predict she’d win the Rolex Grand Slam on the back of Primrose Pride and Supreme Rock? Did John Whitaker know Milton would be the first horse to win more than £1 million in prize money? Did Edward Gal think he’d change the landscape of competitive dressage forever when he first laid eyes on Totilas?

No. Of course they didn’t.

But they would have felt the potential. Then, they would have dared to dream.

At some point those dreams would have turned into something more specific. They would have become definite goals. Then, those riders, unknown and (relatively) unaccomplished at the time, would have chipped away at their dreams, step by step, achievement by achievement, until, one day, the opportunity of a lifetime presented itself.

Just like it did for Charlotte.

It started with her being asked to work for Carl Hester. She came to his yard for a lesson in 2007. In his autobiography Carl talks about suggesting to Charlotte that she might like to stay on for ten days to fill in for one of his staff, who was on holiday.

Of course she stayed.

After the ten days were over, Carl offered her a more permanent position, complementing the team of riders already working at the yard8 –

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an opportunity no ambitious young rider would have passed up.

At some point, Carl decided to put his charge on the five-year old Valegro. And what a decision it turned out to be! The pair went on to win almost every British national championship, from novice onward.

After that, the rest, as they say, is history…

There are many more stories very similar to the one of Charlotte and Valegro. Stories of talented riders being given that special horse, the one of a lifetime. Stories of riders being allowed to hold on to their dreams and turn them into reality. Stories of riders ‘making it happen’ – which is precisely what Carl Hester said to his pupil just before she was about to enter the ring for her first Grand Prix at the 2012 Olympic Games:

‘Don’t forget, some people want it to happen, some wish it would happen, go and make it happen.’

Which is exactly what Charlotte Dujardin did.

Unfortunately though, these modern fairy tales are all too frequently referred to as ‘lucky breaks’, as if the rider had done nothing more than being in the right place at the right time. A fallacy if ever there was one.

None of these so-called overnight success stories actually occurred overnight. None of the world’s top riders ‘suddenly’ rose to the top. Every single one of them spent year after dedicated year honing their skill, knowledge and expertise in order to become the best possible riders and the best possible horsemen or -women.

According to Dr K. Anders Ericsson, Professor of Psychology at Florida State University, people have to amass approximately 10,000 hours of deliberate practice prior to joining the ranks of experts. While these are mere averages – and there are undoubtedly exceptions to this – Ericsson’s rule translates to almost three hours of high quality, structured practice every single day for ten years. If you manage an hour and a half a day, it’ll take you twenty years. If you only do an hour, it’ll take thirty.

It makes you think, doesn’t it?

Carl’s words are actually slightly adapted from Michael Jordan’s original ‘Some people want it to happen, some wish it would happen, and others make it happen.’
Thirty years before you can call yourself an expert. And that’s only if you’re completely focused on what you want to achieve when you sit on your horse.


No ambling along on a long rein, checking messages on your phone. No idle chit chat with the person riding next to you. No deciding to take the day off because you’ve got other things to do…

In short, you need an incredible amount of dedication and commitment to amass the necessary hours to become an ‘overnight success’.

What is more, every single top rider will have gone through the ups and downs that are part and parcel of a life with horses. Horses will, as well we all know, insist on being horses! All the detailed planning in the world amounts to nothing if a horse pulls a tendon, runs into barbed-wire fencing or gets cast in the stable. Coping with adversity is, unfortunately, an important prerequisite of getting to the top. We’ll discuss this in more detail a little later on. Just for now though, suffice it to say that learning how to deal with the stresses of daily life teaches invaluable lessons on how to cope with the strains of performing whenever it matters most.

And yet – such ‘coping skills’ are merely one part of the equation. Yes, they do help you get through a situation and keep your head above the proverbial water. However, they do not stretch to making sure you stay true to yourself and your dreams despite or even because of all the struggles you’ve had to go through. Most importantly, they don’t provide enough protection, enough of a buffer, for when you decide to venture forward into the unknown, putting yourself out there time and again on your quest to become something you really, really want to be.

So what, I hear you ask, does?

According to modern dressage legend Kyra Kyrklund it is all about believing in yourself. The Finnish rider is no stranger to how tough it can be to reach the top. Born in the Finnish capital Helsinki, Kyra was brought up in an entirely non-horsey family. Still, every year, the family would spend their summer holidays in a country cottage. Under the watchful eye of a friend of the family, a large animal vet, young Kyra soon learned all about cows, sheep, pigs and… exactly, horses. Whenever she didn’t spend time with the vet, she could be found at the small farm run by her godmother.
This godmother also happened to have several coldbloods.

One fateful morning Kyra and one of the sons of her godmother decided to take a young mare out for a ride. Thinking back to that day, Kyra still shakes her head in disbelief. The mare was barely four years old. At one point, the young animal spooked and bolted. Both children lost their balance and toppled off her back. Not a big problem, one might think. After all, children regularly fall off their horses and ponies. But on this occasion Kyra’s foot had got caught in the reins, and she was dragged along, behind the galloping horse, until, finally, a nearby farmer managed to catch the frantic animal. Despite the inevitable broken arm, Kyra was not to be deterred. She wanted to ride again. Her parents relented and soon after she was allowed to take her first real lesson at a riding school in Helsinki. To her great horror, the horse waiting for her looked just like that run-away mare from her godmother’s yard. Kyra admits that, to this day, she’s never been so scared.

‘But even then I knew that I had to go through with it.’

And that’s precisely what she did. She wasn’t to be deterred, no matter how scared she was, quire simply because she knew she wanted to ride. Nothing else would do. It was precisely that deep seated knowledge and determination, which would stand her in good stead a few years later when her international equestrian career started in earnest. Throughout the 1970s and ‘80s Finland couldn’t offer an aspiring rider much in the way of support or training. Once again Kyra wasn’t put off. She simply kept going until, finally, she managed to make her mark at the 1988 Olympic Games in Seoul. Her secret?

‘Never, ever give up! Stay positive and keep working away at whatever it is you believe in.’

10 Wolframm, I. (2012), Dreamteam Pferd und Reiter: Persönlichkeitsbestimmung im Reitsport, Müller Rüschlikon

11 Wolframm, I. (2012), Dreamteam Pferd und Reiter: Persönlichkeitsbestimmung im Reitsport, Müller Rüschlikon
As far as I’m concerned, it’s like this: In order to be outstanding, riders need to know, deep down, right at their very core, who they are. In psychology circles, this is known as ‘self-concept’. It’s a kind of ‘inner selfie’, which is to say, the image people hold of themselves deep inside. What is more, riders need to have this kind of self-concept even before they’ve managed to achieve anything noteworthy in the realm of equestrian sports. In fact, they might only just have started riding, but they already know who they’re meant to be. They already know they’re meant to be riders.

So really, it boils down to just this: if you want to make it to the top, you need to be one hundred percent certain that there’s nothing else you should be doing – even though you might still be as far away from the top as you are to the moon. And the icing on the cake is the unflinching, unwavering, unstoppable belief that you’re capable of getting there, no matter the cost or how long it’ll take. Just like Charlotte who took every opportunity to pursue her dream. Just like Kyra wouldn’t be deterred by fear or a country that couldn’t support her at the time.

I can almost see you shake your head in disbelief or even frustration. How, I hear you ask, could anyone possibly believe they’re anything – let alone something as ambitious as being a top rider – before they’ve gone out and done it successfully? How can a young girl’s dream of becoming an Olympic Champion be anything more than a fervent wish? How can fantasy turn into reality with nothing more than a strong sense of self?

Here’s the funny thing. It’s not only possible, but it’s actually really rather common among top riders (or those that are on the brink of it).

Take Emily King, eighteen-year old daughter to eventing supremo Mary King. In her own words:

‘I was competitive from the start and always wanted to show her (Emily’s mother, Mary King, ed.) what I could do.’

There was clearly no doubt in this determined young lady’s mind about what she wanted to do and she set about doing just that. At the
tender age of twelve, she accompanied her mother to the CCI4* event at Pau, France. At a young event horse sale, a grey caught her eye. When her mother declined to buy the horse for her, Emily took the initiative and sent a text to one of Mary’s horse owners asking them to buy the horse for her. They agreed, and ‘Timmy’ was hers.

Six years later and Emily has competed at four European Championships, with an individual silver medal to her name. With a string of six event horses, she is working hard towards carving out her future in the sport.

To the cynics among you, it might be tempting to dismiss such a story with a shrug and a ‘but she already had plenty of opportunity with Mary King as her mother’. Yet the moral of the story is an entirely different one. Even at a young age, Emily King knew precisely what she wanted to do – well before she’d ever done any of it, let alone started being successful at it. She considered herself an eventer years before she could conceivably call herself that. The belief in herself was so pronounced, so unshakable, she tried everything to make it happen. The further she travelled along the road towards turning her dream into reality, the more it reinforced her initial perception of herself as an event rider.

Charlotte Dujardin, our fairy tale princess of modern dressage is no different. Long before ever having competed internationally, she knew she really wanted to ride at the Olympics. It was her dream, her goal, her aspiration. It will have already started to shape who she was. The fact that she wasn’t a top level dressage rider, let alone having ridden at advanced level yet didn’t matter. Then, suddenly, an opportunity presented itself (or rather, she made it happen by asking Carl for lessons). It fitted right into the self-concept she had held of herself for so many years. Now, all she needed to do was take hold of that opportunity – just as Emily did when she sent that fateful text and received a positive answer.

But Emily King and Charlotte Dujardin are just two examples of many successful riders who accepted what was offered to them without a second thought, prepared to do anything to turn opportunity into success, quite simply because it matched precisely who they thought they were.

There are many other exceedingly well-known riders, who, like Emily and Charlotte, knew who they were meant to be from a very early age.
Take Carl Hester, Charlotte’s mentor:

‘I can’t remember when it started, and there is no reason I can put a finger on as to why it did, but I was always fascinated by horses and ponies.’ \(^{13}\)

His sentiments are echoed almost word for word by Mary King, whose own parents weren’t all that keen on horses. (At least not initially. Later on, Mary’s mum would end up driving her around to shows in their old lorry):

‘My mother, who was frightened of horses, had given up after three lessons. However, I was absolutely fascinated by them, and would spend hours sitting on gates staring at horses in fields.’ \(^{14}\)

So how about yourself then? Can you empathise with the early experiences of Emily, Charlotte, Carl or Mary, well before they were equestrian superstars? If you can, if you, too, have always had the sense that riding and being around horses is an integral part of who you are, it’s an important foundation towards turning into the person you want to be.

But no matter how or why an innate connection to horses develops, it needs to be honed and developed as time goes on, to the point where it fuses into a ‘rider persona’ that ends up dictating the majority of riders’ actions, decisions and life choices. As time goes on, sporting achievements follow (quite simply because these riders did everything they needed to in order to become who they wanted to be). These achievements in turn will help all riders, including you, grow even further into their own role. Then, finally, after years of successful participation in the sport, they might even develop into living equestrian legends – through sporting achievement but also through the image they portray outwardly and, more importantly, to themselves.

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The educational psychologist Professor Dr Herb Marsh from Oxford University calls this phenomenon the reciprocal affects model, whereby an existing self-concept shapes achievement, and achievement shapes self-concept in turn. Marsh investigated this effect in great detail in the context of academics\textsuperscript{15}, but other researchers have since determined its viability in a sporting context.

Let’s take a closer look at how this might work in practice.

Most of us can readily believe that if we’re good at something, it’ll shape the way we see ourselves. However, it’s the other way round that seems somewhat more complicated…

You see, it’s like this: Every single human being possesses a self-concept, e.g. an image of what they believe they are like. For most of us, our self-concept is composed of several different roles we play as part of our daily lives. These are called ‘self-aspects’ and they can be many and varied.

You are a daughter or a son to your parents, a mother or father to your children, a husband or wife to your spouse. You are a friend, a colleague, a boss. You are a lawyer, a doctor, a bus driver, a clerk, or a teacher. You are also a rider. A dressage rider, a show jumper, an eventer, a vaulter, an endurance rider, a recreational rider, a horseman or woman.

Most importantly, each and every one of these self-aspects is characterised by different sets of attributes, depending on how we see ourselves in each of these different roles. For example, you might consider yourself a supportive, authoritative, empathetic parent, a loving, faithful spouse, and a competent, motivated rider (whatever your discipline). You’ll no doubt have noticed that I’ve only chosen to use positive attributes in the description of those various roles, i.e. your self-aspects. Yet most of us will also have certain negative beliefs about ourselves. At times, we might also be impatient parents, ungrateful children, needy spouses or unavailable friends.

Some people compartmentalise these different negative and positive attributes into separate self-aspects. They might consider themselves a

‘competent, motivated’ rider in training (only positive attributes) but in competition, they believe themselves to be ‘easily distracted and highly nervous’ (only negative attributes). The problem with such a compartmentalised view of the self is that the minute you enter a situation that invokes a negative self-aspect of yourself, you have no positive attributes to draw on to help you cope. If you enter a stressful competition, convinced that you are going to be distracted and nervous, it’ll take a miracle for you not to be distracted and nervous. I hope you can see how such a negative self-aspect is going to be detrimental to your performance.

Much better, therefore, to integrate your positive and your negative attributes. Instead of separating your ‘rider in training persona’ from your ‘competitive rider persona’, you merge them into one. You’ll view yourself as a competent, motivated rider, who sometimes struggles to concentrate and loses confidence. An integrated view of yourself means you’ll have to admit to yourself that, even in your daily dealings with your horse, you’re not perfect. However, it also means that you always have your positive attributes to draw on, even when things get a bit rough. There might be times, at a show (or any other stressful horsey situation) that you’ll start to feel nervous. But now that you’ve integrated both negative and positive aspects, you’ll have your motivation to draw on. Suddenly, you’ll be able to remind yourself what it is you love about riding and what it is that keeps you going – regardless of whether you’re at home in training or at a show ready to compete.

What is more, you can also draw on the positive attributes you hold in some of your other self-aspects. If, for example, you consider yourself a ‘tough negotiator’ at work, why not use that particular attribute to bolster your confidence in training? If you think you have the patience of a saint when dealing with your children or your husband, why not allow that particular attribute of yourself to boost your rider persona when tackling a particularly tricky training situation? Once you have integrated your various attributes into your ‘rider self-aspect’, it’ll give you a buffer that’ll help you when things get tough. It’ll help you to believe in your own abilities, even when it seems that the odds aren’t in your favour.

Needless to say that your rider persona should contain a number of positive attributes right from the word go.
Such as ‘loving’ the sport à la Charlotte Dujardin.
Such as ‘being competitive’ and ‘wanting to show what I can do’ à la Emily King.
Such as being ‘fascinated by horses’ à la Carl Hester.

But make sure you also allow certain negative attributes (the ones we all have about ourselves) to infiltrate your rider self-aspect. Don’t lock them up in a separate self-aspect (such as a ‘panicky competitive self’) that only rears its ugly head when you least want it to. If you’ve got both negative and positive attributes assembled together in your one ‘rider persona’, the positive bits will help protect against insecurity and self-doubt in times of stress.

What is more, acknowledging – and integrating – unflattering characteristics of yourself into who you are as a rider will actually help you strive for improvement more effectively. Because now you’ll finally have to confront those niggling issues. Since they’ve become part of the ‘everyday you’, you won’t be able to stick your head in the sand any longer. If you want to become the best you can be, you’ll have to address them.

But seeing that you’ve integrated the bad bits with the good, you’ll be able to use your positive attributes as the driving force to help you overcome anything that has held you back in the past. As a result, your self-concept will grow more robust, more resistant to the obstacles that are likely to pop up along the way. And the more robust your self-concept as a rider (whatever kind of rider you want to be), the stronger the belief in yourself. Then, in the words of Carl Hester, you’ll be able to ‘make it happen’.

But don’t just take my word for it. Look at how twenty-year old American Lucy Davis managed to beat all the Big Boys (and girls) of show jumping in one of the toughest competitions there is, the Final Grand Prix of the Global Champions Tour.

In the aftermath of her spectacular win against the world’s elite in Lausanne in 2013, this plucky young lady said:
‘I thought I had a chance. I wasn’t sure if it was a serious chance because my horse is inexperienced, but when you’re up against riders of this level you have to take a chance to win.’

The short statement says it all. Lucy thought she had a chance. She believed in her own competence as a rider – regardless of the relative inexperience of herself and her horse (which might arguably be construed as negative attributes). In the end, none of it mattered because she was able to draw on the most positive attribute of them all: the belief that she could do it.