

## Competition Success

By Sandra Verda, Fit to Ride

What is often the biggest obstacle for riders when it comes to competition? It is not their physical ability to perform the task or required elements of a dressage test or jump course but rather it is the mental component of competition. The pressure, stress, anxiety, nervousness etc. How many of you experience horse show jitters? Most of us do and if you talk to competitors at all levels, most of them experience “butterflies” to some extent. We are so easily distracted and influenced by external stimuli: the person that beat you in every class at the last show is in the warm up ring or your former coach is there and hasn’t seen you ride in a year or so, or a bunch of people are standing beside the rail talking and laughing (of course they are talking about you, RIGHT!?!). It is human nature to be distracted by external factors that are usually out of our control and it affects our ability to be focused and stay on task. The reality of it is that we can’t control what is happening around us but we can control how we react to it. Coaches have a responsibility to prepare their students both physically and mentally for competition and it starts in their weekly lessons. Promoting relaxation, instilling confidence and creating a positive attitude should begin immediately in a person’s riding career.

Creating a positive atmosphere during your lessons, which will then be carried over to the day of the show, is done by setting your students up for success. Having a well thought out lesson plan, an objective that is challenging yet realistic, a concise explanation that incorporates “hows” and “whys”, as well as making corrections in a positive manner and giving positive reinforcement when appropriate are some of the keys to setting a positive tone in your lesson. Having a positive attitude is 90% of the battle. It doesn’t matter how good you are, if you go into the ring unfocused and pessimistic, you will never reach your full potential and have a positive, fulfilling experience.

Developing long and short term goals is an essential component to creating successful experiences for your riders as it allows you to monitor student progression and keeps you on track as you prepare for competition. When you are developing rider goals, aim high, however be realistic. There is a fine line between challenging and over-facing your riders and horses. Goals are to aspire to. It is your responsibility to put forth the stepping stones to allow your rides to reach their goals.

Student confidence is also something you can instill. Being sure that your riders are prepared with the proper skills and requirements for the horse show is essential. Informing them of the requirements of each class so they know what to expect and focusing on a rider’s strengths at the show will help build their confidence. However it is also important to express that there are always unplanned occurrences or surprise changes to schedule that they will have to take in stride. It is vitally important for you as the role model to exhibit good coping skills and a positive attitude especially when things go wrong.

Relaxation is another important element to successful showing as it allows clear thinking. Teach your riders relaxation techniques (breathing, stretching, etc.) will help them when the show tension sets in! In order to; stay focused, think clearly, use proper aids and respond effectively to your coaching, they need to be relaxed. Mental imagery and visualization are helpful tools to promote relaxation and allow a rider to get focused. Practicing visualization on a regular basis is helpful so that a routine and process is established that works for each individual rider. They can then use visualization at the competition to get settled, relaxed, focused and ready.

Remember that what works for one individual may not work for another. It is similar to training hoses, they are all unique, they all have different experiences and backgrounds, they all learn at different rates and they all have different temperaments so you can't train each one exactly the same way. In other words as a coach you need to be flexible, adaptable and observational, with the ability to see each student as an individual with different needs.

There is no doubt that coaches have a very difficult job that requires a high level of focus and awareness as you are charged with the responsibility of creating safe, fun, successful experiences for your riders and horse! So keep up the good work, keep smiling and remind your riders when they go into the ring "smile and have fun!". After all, isn't that what we are here for?!