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Ride



Like a



Peacock

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Introduction

The purpose of “Ride like a Peacock” is to give Riders and Trainers a toolkit that they can use easily within existing training programmes, that will change old beliefs, remove internal boundaries limiting success and open doors to your true potential. Why a “Peacock”? A Peacock has adapted to be colourful and proud despite being a prey animal, not afraid to stand out from the crowd in order to be successful in its goals.

As with most things, many of these tools may be unfamiliar to you, but they are tried and tested in those Countries (Germany, Holland, USA, UK and New Zealand to name a few) and establishments who have adopted a pro-active approach to training their Horse Riders. These countries and establishments are developing top class, quality riders who fulfil their potential, not only developing their technical skills within their discipline but their mind and body as well. They have changed their training programmes to include physical fitness, nutrition, diet and a systematic and structured mental skills programme as part of an integrated development programme for their riders.

Whilst Sport Psychology is not new and you may well have read one of the many books or magazine articles on “thinking positively” and either rejected what has been suggested, not bothered to read it properly for a variety of reasons, or tried to follow the instructions without success? Maybe it has been suggested that you should see a “Sports Psychologist or Hypnotherapist” to get over that “block”. This is a very reactive rather than pro-active way to help you achieve your goals. It is a bit like sitting in a room talking about how you should ride a dressage test and never riding a horse, or waiting until you strain a muscle before realising you should do a warm-up and stretching routine before you get on your horse!

Should you not have the understanding and mental skills that can be developed and improved as part of your training now, rather than seeking a solution once things start to go wrong?

There is a saying “Success breeds Success” which when coupled with “The greatest journeys all start with a single step” captures the essence of “Ride like a Peacock”.

This document makes no attempt to re-write the instructions for riding, there are far too many excellent, well informed and written instructional books on the market from people far more informed in the subject than I. But what this will do is explain some of the basic behaviours seen regularly and how the rider can identify non-productive behaviour and change those behaviour to be even more successful as they strive to achieve their goals.

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It should be noted that it is well recognised that when learning a new skill, 80% of the focus is on motor skills and repetition to ingrain the new processes, only 20% of the focus is on the mental side of the sport. However, once all the appropriate motor skills have been learned that focus ratio changes around and the competitive edge is achieved by focusing 80% of the effort on mental training.

It is also important to realise how much emotional content you apply to each experience. Any event, if looked at in a detached way, will not contain an emotional element which would make it either a positive or negative experience. Mastery of those emotions can significantly change both your physiology and your performances.

Are you prepared to take that first step on a journey that you have been seeking to undertake?

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Dorothee Baumann-Pellny

"For true equestrian art there are no recipes and no tricks, regardless of what saddle we ride in. One has to learn that the greatest attention must be paid to the seemingly easiest things and that that is often the most difficult thing.

One of the most important principles for a rider is always to put the horse first, in other words, to look out for his wellbeing in his stabling, care, and training. The moment the human starts working with the horse determines whether he will become a great athlete and artist who will be able to look back on a long, healthy life, or whether his path ends all too soon due to poor handling and incorrect work.

With knowledge, time, discipline, and body control it is possible to bring the horse almost without training aids into a relaxed position by honest work. You don't have to reach the highest level, but you must always have the feeling that whatever you have accomplished was accomplished well and with honest work. Then you and your horse will always be content."

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Background

“Ride like a Peacock” has its origins from observations made at many different venues throughout the UK, at many different standards of competition, from training grounds, International shows/events, to local club events for different equine disciplines.

When we look closely at successful competition performances, there are patterns to the processes used, which on the surface appear to be totally unique to each rider. Each team will work in its own unique way, using a process, a methodology that works for that rider and that horse or those horses. This process can be observed and replicated by anyone who has the permission to observe and the time to recognise each of the individual steps in the order they are completed. So how does this include the mental preparation and processes of the rider? Perhaps the rider “trusts” the team they have and this in turn, may give the rider the confidence to know the basics have been completed and they can then concentrate on riding?

Basic, key mental patterns and thought processes are completed by every successful competitor without any conscious planning. Through repetition and practise, the skills are honed, fine tuned to the point that we do not need to focus on every minute detail of everything we need to do, we just do it. It is this underlying behaviour we shall explore, with a variety of exercises throughout this document that will help you to focus on what is important at any moment in time.

As a Sports Performance Consultant, Clinical Hypnotherapist and Master NLP Practitioner who also has training in Equine Science and Equine Psychology/Behaviour, the author has made observations of Riders, their mental states and their performance, influences, key processes and the interactions with the horse. Many riders have been questioned to correlate the observations with the rider’s own perception of their processes to ensure the validity of the observations. It is at this point that I would like to thank all those experienced horse people who have kindly given me the opportunity to observe, ride and learn as a “mature” rider and for their input as key reviewers of this document.

Last of all, I would like thank those horses who have given their understanding and patience to me.

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I wonder now if you can sense, see or imagine the following scene:

There you are, standing at the kiosk with a cup of your favourite drink in hand when another horse lorry pulls into the parking area. It is immaculately clean, gleaming as if new. It pulls up just across from the kiosk, giving you a clear view of the occupants as they get out. You notice how professionally turned out they are as they lower the tailgate to reveal an almost sterile interior with a stunning horse now looking out at you over the partition.

Soon you see the rider mount up, again immaculate with boots and tack shining, glinting in the afternoon sun. Horse and rider move off to the warm-up ring looking like Champions, a self assured confidence almost arrogant air giving them a real presence. You keep an eye on them and find out they are in the same class as you and your heart sinks does it not? How can you compete against such a team and rider?

You have made an assumption that the “Peacock” wanted you to make, that they are better than you. The rider or horse may not be as good as they look but you have already thrown in the towel.

Then you have the free for all called “Warm Up” to contend with, where those power games continue. Rider friends, hunting in packs dominate and intimidate the stranger, disrupting your routine and as time passes you become more focused on keeping out of the way rather than actually riding a warm up. Suddenly it is your turn in the ring and you have not done all the warm up you wanted, so you are concerned, uptight and your horse does not appear to be responding as you would like. Maybe a bit hot and tense and your heart beat’s faster. Then it is over and your resulting score is disappointing.

But do these things really happen and stop you achieving your realistic goals, or do you perceive the situation as being far worse than it actually is?

Mental training can help you overcome these presuppositions by focusing you on what you can control, rather than the things that you cannot. It focuses you on the “here and now” rather than trying to foresee the future, which we all know does not happen or we would all be competing at the top level having won the lottery, would we not?

We shall explore how our minds work, why we experience what we do, how we make sense of our own unique world and how our language and emotions can sabotage our performance. Most importantly, you will gain an understanding into the mental skills you can use to change your self-belief, your language and emotions with practise.

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By simply changing your thought processes and physiology, having a plan for success and being aware of what you are “actually” doing will open new opportunities up for you. You too can be that Peacock, proud, self-assured, competent and committed to being the very best you can be in your world, within your personal circumstances. Personal pride in yours and your horse’s appearance take time and effort, but how much better do you feel when you look good? We all do and it is worth bearing in mind as this simple thing can be part of the very foundation of your future success.

A Good Place to Start your Journey

I wonder if you agree with the following:

A horse is a prey animal, programmed for survival and many “he/she’s never done that before” instances result from the riders state of mind and subconscious actions, rather than the horse being naughty.

A horse is not programmed to think in the same way that we do, nor do their actions rely on thinking through a process. They see/feel a stimulus and react with a programmed neuro-muscular reaction which does not include “logic”, but the instinct to survive. As a horse is trained, through repetition, reward and the consistent application of the aids, they learn that when a certain aid is applied the response should be a specific action. Initially the aid might have to be applied in quite a strong manner, however as the relationship between rider and horse develops, it is not uncommon for the strength of the aid to be reduced to an almost imperceptible action.

Their brain also has two distinct halves that work independently for a large portion of the time. Have you had the experience of your horse spooking at a “strange” object on their right as you ride round the school? So you let them examine this object and then they are happy to go past it. You turn them round and they then spook at the same object on their left do they not? Once you have walked them up to the offending object head on, letting both eyes see the object at the same time then no further issues are observed. This behaviour is part of their programmed responses for survival.

So what about the rider?

Remember the 4C's

Concentration, confidence, control and commitment (the 4C's) are generally considered the main mental qualities that are important for successful performance in most sports;

- Concentration - ability to maintain focus
- Confidence - believe in one's abilities
- Control - ability to maintain emotional control regardless of distraction
- Commitment - ability to continue working to agreed goals

The techniques of relaxation, centering and mental imagery can assist an athlete to achieve the 4C's.

Mental Training

Mental training can best be understood by looking at the 4 rider types shown below:

Untrained Rider – Untrained Brain

This person has a desire to ride but has no idea about what is involved or how to ride effectively. They have no technical ability, no basics, little understanding and no idea of what a good rider does.

They are untrained mentally in respect of riding and if you put them in the riding arena on a horse, they would feel extremely vulnerable and whatever small amount of riding ability they have would disappear.

Trained Rider – Untrained Brain

This is the rider that has worked on their riding skills, had many lessons and looks technically sound as they ride. In the school and with friends experiencing non-pressure riding situations they excel. However, when they really want to ride well in competition, under pressure, that wonderful “school riding” ability disappears. It crumbles along with their self-esteem, confidence and ability to work their horse even in the most basic exercises.

This rider has trained their muscles and body but has an untrained brain. No matter how many hours they practise, review their training videos, or how many competitions they enter, they will **not** fulfil their potential until they deal with the thinking and emotional aspects of riding.

This is the rider that more and more sports psychologists see the most!

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Untrained Rider – Trained Brain

This is the rider we have all experienced, the ultimate frustration at the riding school. They ride in a very unorthodox, look very ordinary but they just seem able to ride all the exercises you have difficulty with, making them look effortless. They go to shows and walk away with the prizes just because their horses work so well.

You may feel that with your skills and talent you should beat them easily in the competition ring, yet somehow they keep beating you even under the most intense pressure.

This rider does not have good riding technique but they do have a trained brain. They may not have necessarily trained in the conventional sense, with an instructor, however they do have the ability to get the very best out of themselves and their horse. Even if things do not go well in training, they will still perform well in the competition ring.

Technical deficiencies in their riding abilities will however, only allow them to go so far.

Trained Rider – Trained Brain

This is the ultimate rider who not only rides very well, but can handle their thoughts and emotions when in pressure situations.

Anky Van Grunsven, Lucinda Prior-Palmer, Michael Whitaker, Isabell Werth would be a few examples of this type of rider. This kind of rider has become the very best they can be because they have trained both physically and mentally.

Whatever standard of riding you can look to train both your body and your mind to be the very best you can be.

What type of a rider are you and is it what you want to be? How can you change where you are?

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How the brain “stores” your riding abilities

***“You are what you think you are,
not what you can be.”***

The above statement contains a message that some riders may not grasp on first reading, due to our individual way of understanding language. Think of the word “pain” and there will be countless ways that you can give meaning to that word. Your “meaning” will be based on particular events in the past that have included some form of pain. Your memory of such events includes all the feelings, sights, sounds, people (possibly taste and smell) and circumstances of that past event, however, these past events when recalled will be influenced by your emotional state both at the time of the event and at the time of remembering the event. We can all recall tripping over in a public place, getting up quickly, feeling embarrassed and looking around to see who saw us. At the time we may have really hurt ourselves, but when recalled years later it may appear quite comical can it not?

We are exposed to 2,000,000 pieces of information that could be captured by our 5 senses every second, however as human beings we have a limitation. This limitation means that we cannot focus on more than 7 (plus or minus 2) pieces of information per second. On a bad day this means we can only capture 5 pieces of information per second, a good day 9. In order to be the best we can be, we must therefore be selective in the data we collect and this will be influenced by the circumstances, place and emotional state we are in at that time. Is it no wonder that when we get upset and focus on whatever the negative situation is, we do not seem to be able to feel better quickly? So how does this impact a rider?

If when you are riding, your 7 (plus or minus 2) thoughts are positive and focused, both your horse’s and your performance will increase. If your 7 (plus or minus 2) thoughts are negative then your performance will be reduced.

If you, for example are listening to your trainer in a lesson and you hear; “That’s it, straighten your back, a bit more right rein, be stronger with the leg aid, watch the tempo”, you also become aware of cramp in your leg and you are starting to get a headache, you may just overload your mind.

Hypnotherapist’s sometimes use an induction called “Seven plus or minus 2” to induce a trance in a client, a natural state that we all must pass into and out of at least twice a day as we wake up and go to sleep. A state where your conscious awareness is shut down for a few moments in time and this can happen to you if you attempt to consider too many inputs at a single point in time.

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To explain this further, many of us have been driving along a familiar motorway or road, suddenly becoming aware that we do not remember a large chunk of the journey, or going past a particular place, a state akin to a trance or day dreaming has occurred.

The idea that every movement you make, as a rider completing a certain movement is wired into your mental network once it is learned so you no longer have to think about it at the conscious level is not necessarily correct. Once you decide to ride a particular movement, a motor programme is initiated. This programme does not issue exact instructions to each muscle involved in the movement, rather the brain offers advice/suggestions on how to get the job done in the most appropriate manner and the actual movement is controlled locally at say the wrist or ankle. This “local control of actions” is a result of our inherited survival skills which have allowed us to motivate skills and responses appropriately to keep us safe. For example, if our only motive programme was for walking, how would we have ever escaped a wild animal because we would not know how to run or jump?

As a horse rider, you use many different “local controls of action” and as such this means you never ride with perfect consistency every time you climb aboard. Because both you and your horse have your own internal “motivation” and inbuilt “motor programming”, competitive horse riding is not about being perfect but more about having the least amount of confusion between horse and rider.

So much of your communication abilities are controlled by the way you feel that if you can control how you feel, you can change what information you collect and store for future reference. If you collect information about those things that work for you and your horse, this means you are going to reduce the confusion between you and your horse does it not?

If you feel good and look for positive opportunities to do things even better, success will breed success.

State Control

The rider who is able to control their emotional “state”, will to a large extent be able to control their world and the results they achieve within that world. Remember no two people share the same “world”. We each have our own “world” based on our understandings of our past experiences. These unique experiences are made up of the information obtained from our 5 senses.

Most riders have no idea of how to change their state, “it’s just the way I am”, or “I always feel this way” are readily uttered. The state these riders are in is usually determined by what is happening in the world around them. If it is a nice sunny day you feel good, if you are riding a strange horse and it is co-operative in the school you feel confident, if your trainer is happy and gives you praise you feel happy. The way you feel is controlled by external events, which is not good.

We are not able to control external events like the weather, or which horse we will be given to ride at the school or how other people will judge our performance. If the way you feel is dependent on these things then you are in a vulnerable position. Many of the events in the world you have little or no control over. What you do have control over is how you react to these events. The ability to be in the right state for what you are doing, is the fundamental difference between those that achieve their goals and those that do not.

Having fun when riding involves staying in the present, going with the flow, enjoying the whole experience without being overly worried or concerned with the outcome or result.

Some Riders erroneously believe that Riding, by its very nature must be a struggle. They do not believe that the concept of “fun” can apply to such a challenging, complicated task, especially when competition is involved.

Having fun and being competitive go hand-in-hand. If you are staying in the present moment and not worrying about your ego, if you are free from worrying about others, then you are heading towards being the best you can be.

An emotional “State” can be: happy, relaxed, angry, frustrated etc.

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How we get into an emotional “state”

You change your state many times a day, all day long and can vary from a relaxed state to an angry state, a learning state to a frustrated state and so on.

Your riding state is dependent on two key factors;

1. your internal representations – how you make sense of what you are experiencing, and
2. your body – how you feel physically,

Although you have a range of states that you move between, you also have a baseline state, i.e. a state where you spend most of your time. You have probably not considered this state before, yet now that you are you can become aware of the characteristics of your own baseline state. It is a state that you are so familiar with it feels like home. This does not mean that everyone's baseline state is comfortable. While one rider may have a baseline state that is very tranquil, it could equally be agitated, anxious, nervous or defensive. Some baseline states may not be very nice, however your baseline state will be very comfortable to you.

Internal Representations

An internal representation is basically a thought that is passing through our mind. This thought may be a picture, a sound, a taste, a smell or a feeling. We make sense of our world by using our senses to build up a reference library of images and experiences, which we then use to compare like experiences. In this library, memories may be stored by your internal process with an index marker of a picture, a feeling, a sound, a taste or a smell. If I was to ask you about a favourite memory of a relative's house, you may start with the smell of fresh bread, or a particular perfume, maybe you can picture the front door, or a smiling face, or some other fond memory.

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We have the ability to visit this library at will and are constantly revisiting memories, as if this were a video library and we keep fast forwarding and rewinding in order to review an experience and then compare it with what we are currently experiencing. This library never truly shuts down, even when we are asleep, hence being able to recall certain aspects of our dreams. In the same way that we can experience a range of emotions when watching a good film, as in sadness when we watch Bambi and his mother disappears (apparently shot, but in circumstances that we never actually witness), or excitement with say a Bond film, our own library will cause us to feel certain emotions which directly affect our state. The amazing thing is that almost nobody consciously realises the effect of these internal library references and, even if they do few people actually take control of what memories we recall from the library. For most people, the internal library references keep on running and running, recalling the same old stuff over and over again at the subconscious level and producing the same old results.

**If you always do, what you have always done,
Then you will always get, what you have always
got**

Many riders, up until now have been stuck in the same old library seat, reviewing the same old stuff as if someone else was giving them the information to review. It is almost as if this “someone else” is deciding if you should feel good or bad is it not?

Would you like to take control of what you review, when and how so you can feel how YOU want to feel at a particular time?

The following exercises have been designed to help **you** develop the skill of controlling what you use from your library.

Your library may contain key indexes of Words, Pictures, Smells, Emotions or tastes and these exercises will work for everyone, with practise.

Basic Library of the Mind Exercise 1

- Find a nice comfortable place to sit, where you will not be disturbed
- take 3 nice deep breaths and as you exhale the third breath close your eyes
- pay close attention to your breathing and notice how the muscles of the chest react as you breath in and slowly out
- imagine a horses foot and in particular the hoof. Notice its shape, texture, changes in colour, where the nail holes are, how the heads of the nails contrast with the hoof, every small detail of that hoof
- imagine the sound of the hoof and the stable yard as they meet each other
- imagine now the feel of the reins in your hands, notice the texture of the material, if it is warm or cold.

There are no right or wrongs with this exercise, however please use all your powers of concentration and imagination to make your experience as vivid as you can.

This simple exercise will give you the experience, possibly for the first time, of being able to control your own thoughts. The ability to review information within your library that you want to review.

Rather like a computer, our mind is the program we choose to run and the brain is the hard disk. We have the ability to re-programme our mind to work for us, when we want, similar to pressing the right buttons on the computer to access email or documents.

Basic Library of the Mind Exercise 2

- Find a nice comfortable place to sit, where you will not be
- disturbed
- take 3 nice deep breaths and as you exhale the third breath
- close your eyes
- pay close attention to your breathing and notice how the
- muscles of the chest react as you breath in and slowly out
- Think back to a time recently when you really rode badly
- as you remember this event, replay all the details from the time
- you got on your horse until you got off again
- what do you notice about your recall from the library?
- what sounds can you hear?
- how do you feel?
- really get into the experience and remember only those things you know, not what you have been told or heard since.

Now, as you continue to relive that experience, imagine a circle appearing over the top of those thoughts and put a BIG RED CROSS through that circle....

Now

- think back to a time recently that you rode **really** well
- what do you notice about your recall from the library?
- what do you notice about the sounds you can hear?
- how do you feel this time?
- really allow yourself to get into the experience and remember
- only those things you know, not what you have been told or
- heard since.

There are no right or wrongs with this exercise, however please use all your powers of concentration and imagination to make your experience as vivid as you can.

Again, this simple exercise usually leads to a very important understanding. When you replay a multi-sensory experience in your mind of the bad event, you normally feel bad, you go into a negative state and feel quite un-resourceful. Your body posture will change and you will have rounded shoulders, looking down with your eyes. Yet when you replay the good event, with all its multi-sensory experiences you started to feel good again, change state and feel positive. Your shoulders will be back and head high, looking to the future.

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It may seem obvious, but most people get into a habit of replaying “bad memories” early in their lives. This is not only true for their riding, but in their lives generally. What is not generally recognised is that these habits have been borrowed from people around us. Humans by their very nature are quite lazy in this respect. If our influential others (Parents, grand-parents, i.e. those who are important to us when we are growing up) used a “negative” state in their lives, we normally accept this as usual and borrow the behaviour. How many of us have said something that has immediately reminded us of our mother or father and say “ I sound just like my”?

If you take control of this process and stop replaying these bad memories over and over again, you will be on your way to mastering a very important life skill. The ability to revisit these adopted habits/behaviour patterns and write new ones specifically for yourself.

Successful people take the learning from negative experiences and then let go of it. They focus on things that they do well, then replay their memories from their library over and over thus creating neural pathways that allow them to recreate excellence.

If you can recall *exactly*, all the details of that great ride from the time you awoke in the morning, all the things you did/did not do, how you felt, what you were saying to yourself, how you interacted with those around you and your horse, what other people said to you and all the other small details, you will begin to find your own pattern of success. This pattern does not rely on past negative experiences, lucky mascots or superstition, rather on you and your state of mind which you are fast leaning to utilise in the most effective way for you.

Do you pay attention to only those things you need to complete a task? Or do you find yourself becoming distracted, worrying about things that are irrelevant or may/may not happen?

All through our early years we are primarily made to pay attention to things that are wrong e.g. red crosses and remarks in your school book; your shoes are not polished; your room is a mess etc. These have some value when learning academic subjects, or considering your appearance or even some discipline, but focusing on things that are wrong has no constructive value in riding. That is not to say we should not consider our weaknesses or faults, however we need to consider the development of Belief and mental toughness which does not come from focusing on our deficiencies.

Our internal representations are not always concerned with the past, we can just as easily use the same techniques to construct a “library” representation of what we want to happen in the future. This has a tremendous impact on the state we encounter in the present moment.

At the subconscious level, many riders replay images of past disasters for impending events, be it a ride out after being thrown by your horse, or entering the competition ring. The only way a rider can get really anxious before an event is to replay memories of previous negative experiences. Often a rider will remember a time they forgot a test, or their horse refused at a particular fence, they may imagine what their parent or friends will say should they fail again. Some riders may remember a previous occasion when they felt very nervous and vividly recall that feeling. As this programming continues to run in the sub-conscious of the rider, there is an increasing sense of impending doom about the upcoming event. Not a good way to manage your state!!

Those riders that actually recognise that they do actually have the choice of free will in terms of the direction that they choose to send their mind are **very** empowered riders.

Future Event Exercise 1

- Find a nice comfortable place to sit, where you will not be disturbed
- take 3 nice deep breaths and as you exhale the third breath close your eyes
- pay close attention to your breathing and notice how the muscles of the chest react as you breath in and slowly out
- Imagine now waiting on your horse about to start your event
- Notice all of the sights going on around you
- Notice all the sounds around you now
- Become aware now of how you feel, what muscles are tense
- Notice what you are thinking
- Be aware of those butterflies, maybe sweaty hands or nausea
- Imagine now finishing your event after riding badly
- Notice the deafening silence around you as you leave the arena
- How do you feel now?

Again, not a difficult exercise, but for most this will be an opportunity to bring into conscious awareness, the very processes that go through your mind before an event.

When asked, “how do you feel now?”, it is not uncommon for you to find out that you are already anxious about the forthcoming event. Sometimes this is because you have been concentrating on perfecting a particular aspect of your riding and it has not been going well, or perhaps it is the anticipated detection of your *faults* by other people. It may seem strange that your mind would want to work in this way against you, but we tend to run the same old programs within the brain constantly reinforcing this negative behaviour even though there is no benefit to you as the individual. This behaviour may have be beneficial when buying a house, a new horse or some such item where we need to review all the potential pitfalls, however, is this a good habit for you and your riding ambitions? Of course not as we cannot predict the future, but we try. As we try, we actually develop the negative behaviour which will actually generate this negative result we so much want to avoid. It is a habit, all habits are learnt behaviour so you do have the ability and opportunity to install good habits *if you so choose*.

Future Event Exercise 2

- Find a nice comfortable place to sit, where you will not be disturbed
- take 3 nice deep breaths and as you exhale the third breath close your eyes
- pay close attention to your breathing and notice how the muscles of the chest react as you breath in and slowly out
- Imagine now that future event
- Notice how calm and assured you are as you wait to start your event, you are good and deserve this opportunity for you have worked so hard on perfecting your skills
- Notice how good you feel, at one with your horse
- Sense, see or imagine the route you will take as if it was a white line stretching out before you with all the necessary information you require on sign posts along the white line
- As you enter the test area, take one deep breath and notice how confident you feel
- Notice how easily you and your horse have become a perfect team
- Notice the easy with which you think only of what is important to you at any point in time.
- Imagine now finishing your event after riding very well
- Notice the people smiling at you as you leave the arena
- How do you feel now?

When asked, “how do you feel now?”, notice the complete contrast in the two exercises. The habit you choose to run is very significant and produce very different outcomes does it not? What you choose to focus on will affect your feelings, confidence and self belief.

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Imagery Questionnaire

This questionnaire developed by Rainer Martens PhD, is incredibly helpful in pinpointing how riders experience imagery. Use it to build up your profile so that you can adjust your training programme to suit.

Follow the instructions, then add up the score. This will help you understand how intensely the sights, sounds, feelings or moods are experienced when you review past experiences. You can then concentrate on those areas experienced most vividly as you continue to work on controlling or altering your mental library.

Read the questions and rate each one using the following scale:

- 1. = no image present**
- 2. = not clear or vivid but a recognisable image**
- 3. = moderately clear and vivid**
- 4. = clear and vivid**
- 5. = extremely clear and vivid**

1. Practising Alone

Pick one riding skill and imagine yourself doing this wherever you normally practice, but with no-one else there. Close your eyes for a minute. See what you saw, hear what you heard and feel what you felt as you perform this skill and be aware of your emotional state.

- _____ a. How well did you see yourself doing this riding skill?
- _____ b. How well did you hear the sounds of doing this riding skill?
- _____ c. How well did you feel yourself making the movements?
- _____ d. How aware were you of your emotional state (mood)?

2. Practising with others

Pick one riding skill and imagine yourself doing this wherever you normally practice, but with your riding instructor and/or some friends. You are really struggling to master a skill and everyone present knows it. Close your eyes for a minute, see what you saw, hear what you heard and feel what you felt as you imagine having this struggle and the situation afterwards.

- _____ a. How well did you see yourself in this situation?
- _____ b. How well did you hear the sounds of this situation?
- _____ c. How well did you feel yourself making the movements?
- _____ d. How well did you feel the emotions of this situation?

3. Watching a Friend

Think of watching a friend making a mistake in a competition, such as forgetting the course or having a fall.

- _____ a. How well did you see your friend?
- _____ b. How well did you hear the sounds?
- _____ c. How well did you feel your own physical presence?
- _____ d. How well did you feel the emotions of the situation?

4. Competing

Sense, see or imagine yourself riding in a big event, but imagine yourself doing it skilfully and precisely with ease and the spectators/friends showing their appreciation.

- _____ a. How well did you see yourself in this situation?
- _____ b. How well did you hear the sounds of this situation?
- _____ c. How well did you feel yourself making the movements?
- _____ d. How well did you feel the emotions of this situation?

Scoring

Add up your scores for each answer.

1. What you saw (Visual) _____
 2. What you heard (Auditory) _____
 3. What you felt (Kinaesthetic) _____
 4. How you felt (Mood) _____
- Total** _____

Take a close look at where you fall in the imagery zone. Now you know, pay attention when riding/not riding to how much of your day involves imagery experience.

IMPORTANT

These exercises are of no value if you just think about the concept. You have to experience the contrast in feelings and emotions. You could do the exercise with a friend, but please use your exceptional abilities to fully experience the changes in the way most appropriate for you.

Visualisation and mental rehearsal have many benefits and to actually take charge of the process puts us in a very strong position in terms of our riding.

Physiology – Body Language

Our physiology, the way that we breathe, the way we move, the way we carry our bodies is the second part that affects our state. If you ever get the opportunity to see Anthony Robbins (American Motivator), who has worked with Andre Agassi amongst other elite athletes, if you are a member of his audience you will not be allowed to stay slumped in your seat for any length of time. Robbins will have you up stretching, moving your arms, shaking hands with the person next to you because he knows that a slumped or cramped body position (poor physiology) will lead you into a poor state and a poor state will not allow you to take in and learn what he is presenting to you.

Robbins is an absolute master at influencing and changing people's state. The way that he does this is by changing a person's physiology. If we think about some of the great riders of our time, doesn't their body language create a certain aura?

If you ever have the misfortune to deal with someone who is having a panic attack you will notice how erratic their breathing patterns are, (high up in the chest) the quickest way that you can get them back to some kind of neutral state is by altering their breathing (low in the abdomen), altering physiology causes a corresponding alteration in state.

“Because of the fundamental unity of the mind and body, it is impossible for one aspect to be relaxed while the other is tense.”

“To change your state, change your physiology.”

What has this got to do with you as a rider? Possible everything

So many riders are in poor states when they are riding because of the way that they carry themselves, particularly following a less than good experience. The importance of body language as a skill is vital for successful riding and will have a huge impact on your life.

Developing Presence

Body Language Exercise

Take a piece of paper and a pen then begin to remember how a Champion horse rider moves as they are warming up before they compete.

Write down everything you notice about them

Now, imagine that rider entering the competition arena. Write down all you notice about them

NOTE

The only way you can do this exercise is by creating vivid mental images of the rider in question. This will be a very important resource for us later.

Body Language Exercise 2

Now either watch or imagine you are watching a video of yourself in a similar circumstance. Write down everything you can see.

How would the images change after a less than good experience?

Compare the two sets of descriptions you have written down. What do you notice? What are the key differences?

These two exercises will provide you with what is known as a contrastive analysis. The first exercise will have given you the opportunity to pick out, at an unconscious level, the elements of body language that you deem most important.

The second exercise gives you a vivid image of how your body language is a poor relation to the movements of the Champion.

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Out Riding

Go out to your practise area and have some fun with this.

Mount up and go for a warm up acting “as if” you are the riding champion you described earlier. Once warmed up, imagine you are that riding champion going into the competition environment, then ride like the champion.

If I was simply to say to you “improve your body language”, you will get nowhere as your brain has no blueprint for “good body language. What it does have is stored images of how elite riders move.

When you are instructed to “Act as if”, this bypasses the critical factor of your conscious mind and you can literally experience how you feel differently when you move differently and how movement can interrupt a downward destructive spiral when riding.

Working with this will allow you, as your technical skills develop and your riding skills improve, to develop the quality of presence both internally to yourself and to the outside world, a power combination.

At the very highest level, when you have practised these techniques, your fellow competitors will pick up, at a subconscious level that here is somebody who means business and is going to be difficult to beat.

Nerves, Anxiety and Breathing

There are many riders' performance anxiety and warm-up nerves before competing is a major factor in their performances. However, these same riders when asked will say that nerves do not affect them. Nobody likes to admit to what is perceived to be a weakness, however riders need to master a new skill and work on it as much as their technical skills.

FACT.

“It is next to impossible to be nervous and to be breathing correctly. When breathing correctly and having a moist mouth it makes it even more difficult to be nervous”

The above statement is true because of what we have already discussed about state being created by physiology and internal representations. Just suppose for a moment that this was not a fact, but the rider carried with them the belief and the conviction that when they learnt how to breath correctly that they would be better able to control their tension levels. Would that belief be a useful to carry around with you?

Do not underestimate this technique because of its simplicity, this technique will have a huge impact if learnt easily and completely.

This simple lesson seems to have passed many riders by as many very good riders have no idea about the importance of correct breathing and even less idea about how to breathe correctly in order to achieve their peak potential.

The Fundamentals of Breathing

Does your stomach appear to expand like a balloon as you inhale and go back down as you exhale, whilst the chest remains relatively stable?

Is your breathing slow and of an even tempo?

Does it take as long to breath in as breath out?

Is your breathing silent and smooth?

If the answer to any of the above questions is NO, then you need to change what you are doing.

When you inhale keep your chest still and let your belly expand like a balloon.

When you exhale keep your chest still and let your stomach contract again.

Slow your breathing and let each in breath and each out breath cycle be of even tempo.

Make your breathing silent and smooth.

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Dr Herbert Benson M.D has produced a book called “the relaxation response” in which it is stated;

“The relaxation response is a physical state of deep rest that can change the physical and emotional responses to stress, the very opposite of the ‘fight or flight’ response.”

The **fight-or-flight** response, also called the acute stress response, was first described by [Walter Cannon](#) in 1929. His theory states that animals react to threats with a general discharge of the sympathetic nervous system, priming the animal for fighting or fleeing. This response was later recognized as the first stage of a general adaptation syndrome that regulates stress responses among vertebrates and other organisms.

How to develop Benson’s Relaxation Response

- Pick a focus word that has a significant meaning for you (calm, easy etc.)
- Sit comfortably in a relaxed posture
- Choose a period of time between 5 and 15 minutes
- Close your eyes
- Breathe smoothly and naturally, repeating the focus word each time you breathe out
- If your mind wanders, and it will wander, then just acknowledge that fact and gently bring back the focus word
- Continue for the time you have chosen.

These simple skills of mental training alongside your technical riding training/coaching will produce a build up of your capabilities and remove any previous negative impact of bad breathing on your performance.

A moist mouth

Have you ever noticed that at times of stress or tension, your mouth goes dry?

- Now you have mastered Benson's relaxation response, it is time to work on having a moist mouth.
- Concentrate on producing a small ball of spittle in your mouth
- Once you have generated that ball of spittle, gently move it around your mouth, ensuring you keep it as a ball.

These simple skills that we learnt as a child, when coupled with the relation technique, once given your full attention and practised will stop any nervous tension, stress or anxiety from affecting your performance. Is that not a good thing to know?

With these two techniques, you have already addressed a potential issue before it may have even arisen. Is that not a wonderful learning to employ as appropriate to help you achieve your goals?

So how stressed do you get before competing?

Sport psychologists use many different tests depending on their particular speciality. One of the standard tests is the "Sport Competition Anxiety Test" (SCAT). One version of this test is attached in Appendix C, why not give it a go? Answer the questions honestly and whilst you may not agree with the results, they may surprise you.

What is Imagery and how to Use it

Most people think of mental training as visualisation and positive thinking, a bit like saying there are two types of tea..... with or without milk and that is it! As we become more aware of the tools available to us, we recognise the subtleties required to maximise the benefits to be gained from mental coaching.

Visual imagery (visualisation) is frequently recommended by Sports Psychologists to help riders maximise their performance. All too often, visualisation is recommended in a non-specific way, Sometimes it is promoted as “the technique” everyone can do straight away, a bit like saying one saddle fits all horses.

There are two primary types of visualisation;

Associated

Where you feel yourself actually back in a specific event, re-experiencing every aspect that you can recall

Dis-associated

Where you feel you are watching a video of yourself as on a television screen, or in a cinema.

There are very clear differences and, the impact on your subconscious can be profound when these differences are used properly.

For example, you may be asked to visualise yourself riding at a walk. Given this request, you would probably imagine watching a video of yourself, (a dis-associated view). However, if you were asked to visualise an experience of riding your horse, feeling what you felt, hearing what you heard and seeing what you saw, you will imagine actually being in that same situation again, (an associated view).

Once this essential difference has been understood, adjustments are required to suit your particular situation. In the same way that the saddle is adjusted to suit your horse, the visualisation technique must be tailored and adjusted to suit you. There are some other important distinctions like; is the image you visualise in black and white or colour? Is the image clear or hazy? Can you hear sounds and what are they? Is the image big or small? These questions are just a few of the distinction that you may be asked to consider regardless of how you visualise. These adjustments will greatly increase the results you achieve. The potential we have to make deep, lasting, worthwhile and positive changes to our riding is vast, so consider what you really would like to achieve in small, achievable steps.

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The reason that you may not respond well to video work or you seem unable to change a particular part of your riding skills, can be because you have not practised these skills effectively and in a focused way, or it could be down to how you “represent” the information to yourself in your mind.

Some of the techniques you will learn will provide a powerful companion to your existing riding skills.

Uses for Imagery in Riding

Imagery can be used for:

- Improving a technical skill
- Counteracting negative images of “mistakes”, “lost points”, “falls” etc.
- Relaxation before competing
- Obtaining more energy and confidence before riding
- Working out a successful strategy for the ride ahead
- Calming yourself whilst riding
- Learning from the ride afterwards, replaying successful components and letting go of negative results
- Looking for opportunities to do specific components even better next time.

Just imagine, now.....

You are at one of your favourite venues. Really get into that mental image. Take a good look around, what do you see? How easily can you imagine this venue? Now imagine saying something to a companion or fellow competitor, how easily do you hear the words spoken? Just imagine mounting up, taking hold of the reins, feeling the texture of the reins and the position of the stirrup beneath your foot, how easily can you feel these sensations?

Mental rehearsal uses the power of your subconscious, your imagination, the strongest ability you have is it not? Will-power needs emotion and emotion comes from your ability to imagine what you want.

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Will-power will not work on its own as it needs emotional energy. Will-power on its own is like pushing your car up a hill when you could actually be driving it. Your imagination provides the fuel you require. If will-power was all you needed to achieve your goals, you would very easily be able to give up cigarettes, chocolate and keep your weight exactly where you wanted to. If it comes down to will-power against your imagination, your imagination will win every time. How many times have you been thinking that you are about to be thrown off your horse and it does? By thinking you were going to be thrown off, your body has actually tensed certain muscles in order to make it happen.

Your Imagination dominates your will-power

How Imagery works

If you really think about it, there would seem to be a vast difference between doing something and just thinking about it.
However.....

Just imagine holding a big lemon now. Feel the texture of the skin in your hand. Imagine smelling it. Now imagine taking a knife and cutting it in half. Imagine picking up one half and smelling the juicy fruit. Bring it up to your mouth and get ready to take a bite, or lick it first!

What happened? The lemon was imaginary, but the saliva is real is it not?

Every action begins as a thought and you can make real physical changes just by thinking, because your body reacts to your thoughts. Your mind is like a virtual reality machine, what you think about IS real to you.

Your thoughts affect your muscles directly. Imagine the consequences of that when you are coming up to a large fence and think your hands are not in the right place. Those thoughts will affect your muscles and unless you have some tools to counteract this, the consequences of those thoughts will come true.

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Mental rehearsal works because we can use our thoughts to programme our muscles. When you ride, unless you regularly have lessons, your riding style will stay the same because you have not changed your internal representations of that style. If you use a video to analyse your rides and you concentrate on looking for “faults”, you will find them! The more you focus on the faults, the more difficult it appears to change, therefore it becomes an even bigger issue than it really is. This explains how some riders struggle more and more as they become more knowledgeable about their riding style. Each time they review a video, they focus more and more on these faults, which in turn re-enforces the internal representations of the very thing they want to get rid of.

The big thing between adults and children is quite simply that children look to do things even better. Children do not know how, intellectually, to ride, they also have no internal representations of how they are doing it, but they may have an idea of how a favourite rider does it, so they just go and do what they see other riders doing. Children do not have the critical analyst inside them, questioning and placing doubts in their mind, they just go and have fun.

The following exercise is a very powerful system that you can combine with your technical training to establish that what the trainer says is being represented internally by you in the way that is most beneficial to you.

1. “Associated” is when you are using imagery and you are actually “in” the images, looking through your own eyes
2. “Dissociated” is when you are watching the imagery as though you are sat in a cinema and you are an observer
3. Imagery has Visual, Auditory and Kinaesthetic (feeling) components. The most potent imagery combines these 3 components (modalities).

So how do you change behaviour that is not beneficial?

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What is NLP and how can you use it?

NLP stands for **Neuro-Linguistic Programming**, a name that encompasses the three most influential components involved in producing human experience: neurology, language and programming. The neurological system regulates how our bodies function, language determines how we interface and communicate with other people and our programming determines the kinds of models of the world we create. Neuro-Linguistic Programming describes the fundamental dynamics between mind (neuro) and language (linguistic) and how their interplay affects our body and behaviour (programming).

NLP is a **pragmatic school of thought** - an 'epistemology' - that addresses the many levels involved in being human. NLP is a multi-dimensional process that involves the development of behavioural competence and flexibility, but also involves strategic thinking and an understanding of the mental and cognitive processes behind behaviour. NLP provides tools and skills for the development of states of individual excellence, but it also establishes a system of empowering beliefs and presuppositions about what human beings are, what communication is and what the process of change is all about. At another level, NLP is about self-discovery, exploring identity and mission. It also provides a framework for understanding and relating to the 'spiritual' part of human experience that reaches beyond us as individuals to our family, community and global systems. NLP is not only about competence and excellence, it is about wisdom and vision.

As a rider it is possible to change how you think about things which in turn will change how you do them at a subconscious level. The next exercise will help you to understand how to change any aspect of your riding if it is right for you to do so.

The use of NLPs, New Behaviour Generator

I would like to you to think about a specific part of your riding skill that an expert rider you know does well, that you would like to do even better, now;

1. take a couple of deep, slow breaths
2. close your eyes and notice your body becoming more relaxed
3. sense, see or imagine yourself sat watching a large movie screen
4. as you watch the screen, the expert rider appears. As you watch, the expert performs the specific riding element that you wish to have. You are able to choose what part/side of the skill you wish to see and take the opportunity to investigate every appropriate angle appropriate for you.
5. as you watch the movie again, you are really able to notice any specific nuances, movements, breathing patterns, eye movements, sounds, how the expert's muscles are being used and all the other small details of the specific skill.
6. you watch the movie again, this time you have changed the rider to you. Your own physical form is on the screen. Again, really notice all the specific nuances of the action, allow your mind to direct you to what is important for you.
7. now, as you take a deep breath and exhale slowly, you step into the movie. You see, hear and feel everything as you become the expert. You absorb the motions, the ability and the skill. You are now looking through your own eyes, hearing through your own ears, feeling the feelings.
8. Play the movie again, with you still in the action, this time you take the movements and skills and you are actually riding in an upcoming event. See yourself completing this new skill easily, competently and effortlessly.
9. Now, open your eyes, take a good deep breath and stretch.

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Now that we have started to explore and understand the difference between an associated image and a dissociated image, we can now start to look at how we can use these techniques to address potential issues before they become performance affecting.

The effect of falls or bad riding experiences and the way that you re-present these instances in your mind will effect self-belief, your capabilities and your confidence.

So let us have a look at how we can use our new knowledge to remove self doubts and in extreme cases, phobias.

New Behaviour Generator for Fears and Phobias

Internal representations taken to the extreme and which we allow to control us rather than using our own self control, is called a Phobia. A phobia is an incredible piece learning and practise that you **never** forget to have. They are very consistent, repetitive and are self-perpetuating. A phobia causes an intense kinaesthetic (feelings) to an internal representation.

How to have a phobia

1. have an experience charged with emotion (being thrown from your horse)
2. replay the experience internally in a strongly associated state (keep replaying the action in your mind and be "in" the action).
3. do this many times
4. your brain then encodes this experience as one to avoid at all costs (being terrified of either your horse or whatever was involved in the initiating event).
5. when a potential situation for this experience to happen again, your brain will give an extreme fight or flight command, producing a huge hormonal rush, creating symptoms of panic, palpitations, extreme tension, irrational thoughts, breathlessness etc.

The dynamics of a phobia are very similar to how we go into riding slumps, how we have bogey venues, fences, competitions or people.

Fast Phobia (Riding issue) cure

- Find a nice comfortable place to sit, where you will not be disturbed
- take 3 nice deep breaths and as you exhale the third breath close your eyes
- pay close attention to your breathing and notice how the muscles of the chest react as you breath in and slowly out
- Imagine you are sat in a cinema seat and the screen is up in front of you
- Sense, see or imagine a black and white picture of yourself on the screen
- Now, imagine drifting out of your seat, upwards into the projection room
- As you enter the projection room, you can see all the projectors and equipment, and a viewing window looking out over the seats towards the screen.
- Move forward until you can look out of the window and see the back of yourself sat, watching the black and white image on the screen
- Now, the black and white image on the screen is of your bad experience, running from start to finish. At the end you now freeze frame it.
- Imagine drifting down now from the projector room, down, down into this frozen image until you are in the final frozen picture, looking out of your own eyes, seeing what you saw, feeling what you felt and hearing what you heard.
- Rewind the film you are now in very quickly backwards, taking no more than two seconds..... whoooosh
- Again, rewind the film you are now in very quickly backwards, taking no more than two seconds..... whoooosh
- And again, rewind the film you are now in very quickly backwards, taking no more than two seconds..... whoooosh
- And again, rewind the film you are now in very quickly backwards, taking no more than two seconds..... whoooosh
-

When you have completed this, in your own time open your eyes, take a good deep breath and stretch.

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The brain has practically no reference point for things in reverse, even reversing a car happens in forward time does it not?

If you really work and practise this technique, by watching the situation backwards it actually scrambles the pattern within your brain and makes it so much more difficult to ever recall again in the same old way. The effect of this is that you can have a negative experience, as we all do, but it will not cause any lasting damage as you cannot, either consciously or sub-consciously replay the old tape, it has no meaning.

Why Mental Practise (Imagery) Works

There are over 100 research studies documenting the effects of mental training on athletic performance with many Sports Scientists spending the greater part of their career trying to understand this delicate relationship.

There appears to be two possible explanations as to why mental practise actually works;

1. Symbolic Learning Theory

Imagery may well be part of a coding system that actually helps us to understand movement. The theory says that every move we make in life is first coded like a blueprint in our minds and in our nervous system, so that we actually rehearse our riding, making the gestures symbolic and making them more familiar to our body chemistry. By regularly using our mental rehearsals and practising our mental imagery, we are setting the stage for movement to become quite automatic and easy to both recall and complete. If any top rider wants to improve a particular action, they might break down each component of the task by mentally rehearsing a specific position. In this way they will be able to encode each physical movement so that it is recorded as a blueprint for the entire riding experience. Dramatic improvements have been documented and reported in basketball free-throw shooting, Athletics, shooting and many other disciplines.

2. Psycho neuromuscular Theory

Mental practise works because even when we sit quietly in our chair and mentally rehearse, we are actually producing very small muscle contractions similar to those involved in the riding experience. This theory makes a lot of sense does it not? In the mind of many great athletes, mental “faxes” and other electronic impulses are constantly sent to the muscles and tendons to both remind and initiate all the components for them to complete their particular discipline. These messages travel at lightning speed and cause the muscles to fire at appropriate sequences so they can perform at their very best.

The theory has been tested quite frequently by simply having athletes mentally rehearse images and then measuring the electrical activity with an EMG machine attached to both their arms and legs. One downhill skier had their electrical activity measured whilst they sat quietly imaging the race course. The printout of the skier’s leg muscle contractions and firings corresponded exactly to the terrain of the challenging course.

If we mentally rehearse our riding with great intensity using all our senses, we strengthen and condition the muscle firings and neuromuscular communication lines so that the messages get there more efficiently and with greater clarity.

Who uses Mental Practise?

Since the days of the ancient Greeks, imagery had been used in one form or another and have been documented. It may be that it is an inherent part of human nature going much further in time to the very dawn of civilisation. By the time of the 1960 Olympic games in Melbourne and the World cup that imagery really began to come to the fore as a very powerful tool for Sports Psychologists who now accompanied many of the Eastern Bloc Athletes and in fact the Brazilian football team.

In the 1980’s, a social psychologist Jacqueline Golding PhD and Steven Ungerleider PhD began an in-depth study of athletes. They studied track and field athletes who had competed in the 1984 and 1987 U.S. Championships. In 1987 they initiated a study of 1200 Olympic track and field athletes, the largest ever carried out in the USA at that time. These athletes were given a 240 item questionnaire that covered physical and mental training, strategies, injuries, mood, motivation and social support. The athletes were surveyed both before and after the games and their results revealed that almost all athletes had heard of imagery, visualisation or mental practise and understood the concept. 83% of the athletes reported using some form of imagery in their

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training. Equal numbers of men and women used mental training regardless of whether they had a coach. Today, more and more sporting organisations are employing Sports Psychologists as a matter of course and one rider, Pippa Funnell has written about this very subject in her autobiography.

When do they use it?

99% of the athletes surveyed said that they practised before competition in bed before sleep, immediately before their event, or chose to gradually build up their mental practise over a couple of weeks. Almost 33% practised during their event and over 20% practised afterwards.

The analysis showed the following breakdown of the frequency for the use of mental imagery in training;

Once a week:	one in three athletes completed imagery training
Twice per week:	one in five athletes completed imagery training
Three to Six times per week:	one in three athletes completed imagery training
More than seven times per week:	one in ten athletes completed imagery training

The results showed that those who trained the longest hours reported more mental training.

Athletes who had visited a Sports medical specialist were more likely to use mental training than those who did not.

A visit to a sports physician suggests an athletic injury and some injured athletes use mental practise because they can't practise physically. It is also possible that athletes who seek out this kind of specialist for medical treatment are also the same ones who seek out special cognitive techniques such as sports psychology.

Improving you Mental Imagery abilities

Relaxation techniques to improve imagery and visualisation come from two different concepts.

The first is the muscle-to-mind concept which suggests that athletes can become so tuned into their muscles that they are ultra-sensitive to any level of tension and arousal. The main reason for learning these techniques is to train their muscles to evaluate the situation and to remove any tension immediately it arises if it is not necessary.

The second concept is the mind-to-muscle technique that is usually present in meditation techniques. Here the athlete becomes aware of arousal and tension, first from the mind and then sends the appropriate quietening or relaxation responses to the muscles.

Both techniques are equally effective and are precipitated by an awareness that allows for any tension to be interrupted in the nerve endings as they travel through the central nervous system. Whether the nervous energy is travelling to or from the mind is irrelevant. The point being is that an interruption of this arousal and nervous energy flow so that the message is re-coded for relaxation. Whilst this may sound very technical and neurological, research suggests that the techniques for quietening the mind and body are really quite simple. By doing muscle relaxation before and after riding practise, you are simply reminding the muscles, neurons and their pathways to be relaxed for the next training session. You are in effect, building in muscle memory similar to riding skill development memory.

At this point it must be re-iterated that some stress and tension is good if you are going to perform at your highest level. What these techniques do is remove unnecessary tension and stress that will inhibit your performance.

When you learn to relax your mind and your body together, you send messages to the entire body that set a standard of how to react in stressful situations. This standard sets the stage for moving to imagery and visualisation techniques. When you are relaxed, there are no mental, emotional or cognitive interferences. Your mind becomes open and receptive for image clarity and visual fine tuning.

State Dependent Learning

A group of medical students were given lectures in a specially designed lecture theatre. The room was set out to allow the students maximum relaxation with soft lighting, the colour of the walls were in shades that encouraged calmness and the seating was extremely comfortable with classical music playing in the background.

Half way through the course, the group split into two for a “test” and “examination”.

Group one took their tests in the original “relaxed” room, Group two took their test in a new room. This room was the complete opposite, lighting was harsh, seating very uncomfortable and the walls were painted in very drab colours. The results of the test speak for themselves;

Group One in the relaxed room had an average grade of 85%
Group Two in the harsh room had an average grade of 29%

Is this not so similar to your experience in riding? You ride really well at home or even in warm-up, but something happens on the way to the competition arena. You may forget part of a test, tense up, say the horse is not right and assume it is your skills that are at fault. Well the good news is that your riding skills didn't change, your **state** did. You were nicely relaxed on the way to the venue and in the warm-up, but by the time it was your turn in the ring you had changed to a **tense** state.

When we learn in a certain state, our ability to recall the learning is dependent on returning to that state

If we are to ride to the very best we can, we need to create a relaxed environment to learn our riding skills and THEN we MUST know how to return to that state when competing. If we do not do this we will inevitably end up in a negative loop whereby we ride well in at home, ride well in warm-up, then go to compete and ride less than well, so we go back and work hard at fixing a technical issue that may not exist, ride well at home.....etc. so round we go again, reinforcing the negative aspects.

Now you have learned to change state and have practised it well, are you not now in a much better place?

Two Kinds of Memory

Just take a moment now to recall what you were doing on the 6th October 2000, can you remember the events of the day? Unless the date has some specific attachments to it, like a birthday, you were on holiday, an anniversary or the day you won a prize you were probably like most people and have struggled to recall anything about that day. If you took out your old diary and reviewed the same day, events may start to come back to you, but the majority of the day will remain a mystery.

Now take a moment and recall what you were doing on the 11th September 2001. As you do this, not only will you remember the terrible events of that day, but you will also remember who you were with, where you were including times and places almost exactly. Your memory will be vivid and precise, for many of us the memories may be too vivid and too precise. But why is there this difference?

Two dates in our own personal history, one completely vivid and easy to recall despite the content, the other a distant fading memory. This faded memory is still there, however distant and can be recalled with some effort.

The above is a very good example of our two forms of memory. One is a memory charged with emotion and this is instantly recalled and extremely powerful because as we recall it, we instantly have a physical reaction to it.

What has this got to do with your riding? Well maybe everything. If we understand from the above example that we have a dual coding system for events and those events we link with strong emotions, it will be instantly recalled, then we need to be very careful about how we use our emotions when riding and how we process that experience afterwards.

Think what you have done after a less than successful competition. You attach your emotions to the negative event(s) that occurred and pay very little attention to any positive aspects you may have done well.

We so often see riders “getting frustrated” with either themselves or their horse and any other person or object that captures their attention. What these riders are inadvertently doing is laying down the foundation for future failure as their brain will recall instantly the negative emotions that will influence future riding. We do not have to “get frustrated” externally either, many riders attach huge emotion to less than good riding experiences internally, beating themselves up, moaning about their own perceived lack of talent. This is a very covert way of destroying their own ability. It is a way for these riders to produce the neural connections in their brain that will keep them repeating the same errors over and over again.

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In simple terms, if you start to attach more emotion to your successful outcomes and reduce the emotional charge on less than desirable riding experiences, you will literally start to re-wire the circuitry in your brain, change your own beliefs and start to ride to your full potential

This information explains so many of the seemingly illogical occurrences you encounter when riding, why is it when you go to ride a particular event you perform well and yet another event you always do worse?

When visiting certain venues, you only need to turn into the drive and you “know” that you are going to have a good day despite the presence of a rider in your class that always gets better scores than you. All of these examples are evidence of the way that your memory for past events will have a huge influence on your performance. These emotionally charged memory traces will overcome any “good form” you take into a given day and will continue to cause their own brand of unwanted havoc.

In many ways we are all conditioned to do this from an early age, when we are in school and our primary mistakes are highlighted. You do some homework, hand in our work and then when they are returned with big “RED” crosses pointing out what we have done wrong. Through our entire lives we are exposed in so many ways to societies need to focus on what is missing or what is at fault rather than what we get right. Most newspapers and magazines sell many of their editions by pointing out what is wrong with the world.

In riding terms, it is so easy to really focus on what we have done wrong and give little or no attention to the things that we do well. The normal coaching relationship is that of focusing on faults. This is not true of the great riders, who have the ability to develop ways to reduce the emotional charge attached to a bad event and increasing the emotional reaction to good events.

So you can see that the way we filter the experience known as horse riding AFTER we have ridden can have a profound influence on what happens when we go to ride again. If you wish to improve your riding, it is imperative that when you have ridden you take the learning’s required from any negative experience and then let it go. At the same time, play again and again in the theatre of your mind all the good things from your ride, the great experiences, replay them back in vivid multi sensory images as you literally re-live the positive event. This WILL have an effect on your riding. You too can “Ride like a Peacock” should you choose to do so.

Appendix A & B have been included for your use. They are important tools in helping you focus on those things you can do better and those things that need not be done should you wish to improve.

Appendix A – Rider Trainer Record

Date:	
Venue:	
Purpose of Ride:	
Time of Ride:	
Weather Conditions:	

Warm Up Completed	
Duration	
Exercise Practised	
Indoor/Outdoor	
Outcome	
Additional help required	
Things to work on	
Things to do differently	
Things to stop doing	
Progress	

Appendix B – Competition Record

Date:
Venue:

Class(es) Entered:

Time of Ride:
Weather
Conditions:

Warm Up
Completed
Duration

Class
Indoor/Outdoor
Outcome

Observations

Warm Up
Completed
Duration

Class
Indoor/Outdoor
Outcome

Observations

Appendix C – SCAT

Sport Competition Anxiety Test

Read each statement below, decide if you "Rarely", "Sometimes" or "Often" feel this way when competing in your sport, tick the appropriate box to indicate your response.

	Rarely	Sometimes	Often
1. Competing against others is socially enjoyable	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
2. Before I compete I feel uneasy	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
3. Before I compete I worry about not performing well	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
4. I am a good sportsman when I compete	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
5. When I compete, I worry about making mistakes	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
6. Before I compete I am calm	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
7. Setting a goal is important when competing	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
8. Before I compete I get a queasy feeling in my stomach	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
9. Just before competing, I notice my heart beats faster than usual	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
10. I like to compete in games that demands a lot of physical energy	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
11. Before I compete I feel relaxed	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
12. Before I compete I am nervous	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
13. Team sports are more exciting than individual sports	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
14. I get nervous wanting to start the game	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
15. Before I compete I usually get uptight	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Appendix C – SCAT How to Mark

Analysis

The score for the response to each question is detailed below. Enter the score for each question in the “Athlete’s Score” column and then total the column up to provide a SCAT score.

Note that questions 1,4,7,10 and 13 score zero regardless of the response.

Question No	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Athlete’s Score
1	0	0	0	
2	1	2	3	
3	1	2	3	
4	0	0	0	
5	1	2	3	
6	3	2	1	
7	0	0	0	
8	1	2	3	
9	1	2	3	
10	0	0	0	
11	3	2	1	
12	1	2	3	
13	0	0	0	
14	1	2	3	
15	1	2	3	

Total

SCAT Score

Less than 17

17 to 24

More than 24

Analysis

You have a low level of anxiety

You have an average level of anxiety

You have a high level of anxiety

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Appendix D – Pre/Post Competition Check List

Date of Competition:
Venue:

To Be Completed Ahead of Competition Date

Tack Prepared ahead of day:	Yes	No	Date Prepared _/_/___
Clothing Prepared/packed ahead of day:	Yes	No	Date Prepared _/_/___
Transport Prepared ahead of day:	Yes	No	Date Prepared _/_/___
Documentation Prepared	Yes	No	Date Prepared _/_/___
Directions to Venue Prepared	Yes	No	Date Prepared _/_/___
Time of departure from Yard/Stable Confirmed	Yes	No	Ensuring appropriate time for checking in, warm up, Course walk etc.

To Be Completed on Day Of Competition

Horse Prepared appropriately	Yes	No	Comments
Horse transport prepared and Safe	Yes	No	Comments
Equipment/Clothing/paperwork Packed	Yes	No	Comments
Horse transport loaded appropriately (Water/Feed/Tack)	Yes	No	Comments

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To Be Completed upon arrival at Venue			
Horse Checked	Yes	No	Comments
Check in with Secretary Completed	Yes	No	Comments Should be at least 1 hour before class starts or as appropriate
Location of warm up and arena checked	Yes	No	Comments
Warm Up Completed	Yes	No	Time spent on Warm up
Observations			

Post Competition Review		
Circle the Answer that best describes your performance)		
Position and Controls		
Were my eyes up?	Yes	No
Were my Shoulders square?	Yes	No
Did I maintain Balance?	Yes	No
Did I follow the Horse's balancing gestures?	Yes	No
Did I feel the horse?	Yes	No
Did I maintain rhythm?	Yes	No
Did I have the correct pace?	Yes	No
Did I have the correct leg position?	Yes	No
Did I use my hands correctly?	Yes	No
Did I use my weight correctly?	Yes	No
Evaluate how I jumped the fences		

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Physical Condition

Breathing	Relaxed		Tense/tight
Muscular Tension	Low	Moderate	High
Energy Level	Low	Moderate	High
Arousal Level	Low	Optimal	Too High
Muscular Strength	Low	Moderate	High
Muscular Flexibility	Low	Moderate	High
Did I eat Well?	Yes		No
Did I drink enough?	Yes		No
Did I get enough sleep?	Yes		No

Emotional Control

Did I feel self-confident?	Yes		No
Did I use positive self-talk?	Yes		No
Did I use negative self-talk?	Yes		No
Did I control my anger?	Yes	No	Not Applicable
Was I able to Control my nerves?	Yes		No
Did I choke?	Yes		No
Did I blame others for my mistakes?	Yes		No
Did I feel jealous?	Yes		No
Did I feel envious?	Yes		No
Did I compare myself to others?	Yes		No
Emotionally I felt	Good	Bad	Ok

Mental Training Strategies

Did I formulate daily performance goals/plans?	Yes		No
Did I execute my planned goals?	Yes		No
Did I ride with a present focus?	Yes		No
Did I trust what I had practised?	Yes		No
Did I use my performance routine?	Yes		No
Did I use visualisation?	Yes		No
Did I adjust my energy level?	Yes		No

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Concentration

Did I remember the course?	Yes	No
Did I remember the strides?	Yes	No
Was I able to ride the strides?	Yes	No
Did I use my corners effectively?	Yes	No
Did I remember my plan?	Yes	No
Did I execute my plan?	Yes	No

Distraction Control Strategies

I was able to turn stress into challenge	Yes	No
I was able to "let go" of mistakes	Yes	No
I focused on positive aspects of performance	Yes	No
I evaluated performance, when leaving the competition arena, in a positive manner	Yes	No
I accepted my performance	Yes	No
My distractions were		

My reactions were

I can improve my reactions by

Performance Outcomes

My Performance was: (Circle one)

Peak Performance
Consistent high performance
Consistent average performance
Inconsistent performance

My strengths were:

My weaknesses were:

I will commit to:

1. Praising myself for my strengths
2. Letting go of my mistakes
3. Accepting my performance
4. Identifying positive practice methods
5. Congratulating myself for competing

Signed _____

Date _____

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About Gary Diplock

C.M.H, D.Hyp, GQHP, MPNLP, Dip.Sports.Psychol

As a Member of the Association for NLP and an affiliate Member of BASES (the British Association of Sports and Exercise Sciences), Gary has access to the latest sporting information and research. He combines many techniques when working with Competitor's, helping his Client's obtain unique insights into their behaviour and attitudes. Due to a belief that "the Client comes first", he has built a reputation that attracts more Client's via "word of mouth", rather than through advertising. Gary believes in working with "what the Client brings", rather than focusing on "perfect performances" or on teaching relaxation techniques alone, preferring to develop the inherent skills each Client has. Even the most negative aspects can be re-focused for beneficial, worthwhile and progressive goals.

Gary travels extensively to gain knowledge of the latest techniques and to meet clients all over the UK. Gary is a keen golfer and Equestrian Rider, taking the opportunity to learn to ride a horse as a mature adult following the advice of a friend who competed regularly in Dressage events. They were kind enough to give Gary a taste of riding on one of their horses and he soon took up the challenge of the horse world. Rediscovering how to learn a complex discipline has helped Gary to add so much more to his help and support of Clients.

Clients include Horse Riders (all disciplines), Golfers, Snooker Players, Swimmers, Cricketers and many other sports both Professional and Amateur, all ages and abilities, able bodied and disabled. Most work is completed during one to one sessions both at actual events and in training. Many have made significant progress in their chosen sport in only a few sessions.

"It is important that I fully understand the challenges my Clients face, how they perceive those challenges, how they behave at training and competition and what their goals really are. I also spend time getting to know them as people. Once I gain the understanding of their world, then the work can begin. My Clients success is just that, their success. "

Note: If you are looking for Client testimonials, sorry they are not used to enhance or promote our services due to our strict privacy policy.