

The Mental Side of Competition

with Warwick Schiller

When competing with horses, there are a lot of things you can't control. You can't control the schedule. You can't control who the judge is. You can't control the arena conditions. You can't control the weather. You can't control how many are in your class. You can't control who is riding what horse in your class, how much they paid for their horse, or who they train with.

What you can control are your thoughts, and your actions. And through those two things, by default, you have some sort of control over your horse. But it's your thoughts that cause your actions, so keeping control of your thoughts is paramount. In this article, I'm going to talk about two different scenarios when getting ready to compete. The first one is about controlling your thoughts when you need to think about something. The second scenario, which is probably more for riders who are quite adept at their chosen discipline, is when you don't need to think about something. I know that sounds cryptic, but it will make sense when we get to it.

Because my competition experience is mostly with the discipline of reining, I'm

going to talk in terms of that, but it's possible to relate this to almost any equine discipline.

Before you compete, many times the anxiety you feel is the result of things you feel may go wrong. It may be because you are concerned about your horse not performing a slide well, or not getting your left to right lead change. It's OK to have thought like that come up, but what you do with those thoughts will define your success or cause your defeat.

Before competing on the Australian reining team at the World Equestrian Games this year, my wife Robyn and I had coaching from a fabulous Equestrian Mindset Coach from New Zealand named **Jane Pike**. One of the many wonderful things I heard Jane say was "you can't move away from something, you can only move towards something."

When asked what she means by that, her usual explanation is to talk about a big blue tree. She will say "OK, I want you to not picture a big blue tree. I don't want you to picture a yellow bird at the top of that big

blue tree. And while you are not picturing a big blue tree with a yellow bird at the top of it, I want you to not picture some green grass at the foot of the tree."

So what are you thinking about now?

A big blue tree, with a yellow bird at the top, and some green grass at the bottom! Because you can't NOT think about something, you can only think about something different.

Now I want you to think about holding a football. Think about is it new or old, shiny or scuffed? Is it firmly pumped up or a little soft?

Where has your big blue tree gone? It's disappeared!

This is really about choosing to think about what you want to happen (moving towards) instead of thinking about what you don't want to happen (moving away). In the case of the anxiety over your left to right lead change, when that thought comes up you want to shift your thoughts from it going wrong, to "what do I need to do to make it go right." This is a combination of having done your homework, trusting your training up until this point, and before you show mentally rehearsing what you are going to do to ensure a clean change.

"I'm going to get straight a little early in the centre, then I'm going to leg yield him off my right leg a touch, keep looking and thinking straight, then slide my left leg back, and when he changes then I'm going to slowly look right and start to steer that direction."

If you allow your mind to think about what will go wrong, inevitably it will go wrong. Shifting your thoughts to what you need to do to make it be right, will ensure a more successful outcome.

Teaching my mind to think that way is a skill I've learned from years competing in reining. However, this year, for the World Equestrian Games, I learned an entirely new skill with amazing results. The skill of not thinking about anything.

My wife and I decided to qualify for the Australian team for WEG in Tryon after

learning that many of the other experienced Australian riders were not in a position to mount a campaign to qualify. It's a huge undertaking, in time, effort and finances. We had both been on the Australian team in Kentucky in 2010, and the experience at the time was a life highlight. I listed my favourite lifetime experiences as marriage, fatherhood, and then WEG. In that order.

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I had been travelling and doing clinics for the past 10 years, and had planned to take a sabbatical from the clinics in 2018 to focus on some personal growth, so I had the time to do all the qualifiers. However, I had not competed in reining for three years, and needed all the practice I could get, so we purchased another reiner for me to show in the bigger derbies, in order for me to get back in the show ring under some pressure. We also enlisted the help of our friend Jane Pike. Her background in Neurolinguistic Programming and years as a yogi meshed in well with the meditation, yoga and mindfulness practices I had spent the earlier part of the year working on.

When we arrived in Tryon for WEG, our chef d'equipe, **Rodney Peachey**, asked "given the best case scenario, what do you think you and your horses are capable of?" Both Robyn and I thought that a 217 ½ would be what we could achieve.

During the year Jane had coached us on our mindset, had made us hypnosis audios to listen to, and right before WEG taught us some breathing techniques she had learned as a yogi in India. These came in handy in the days leading up to competition at Tryon. Any time I got nervous (which was my mind thinking ahead to future events



Warwick Schiller & Plenty Of Guns
Photo: Dead or Alive Photo.



Robyn Schiller & Smart Like Steady
Photo: Alden Corrigan.

and not being present), I would employ the breathing techniques Jane had taught us, and my anxiety would disappear. At this point in time our horses were solid, and this was a time for not thinking about what we were going to do.

The first round of individual competition came and it was the most relaxed I'd ever been showing a horse, ever. There were a couple of times in the warm up pen I felt anxious, and as soon as I did, I'd do the breathing technique and a clear, calm focus would come over me. Robyn had the same experience, and she marked a 218, I marked a 217. We showed as good as we'd hoped. What we hadn't hoped, or even considered, was to make the individual semi-finals, to possibly make it back to the individual finals. But after the first round, both Robyn and I had made the semi-finals the following day. The top 15 went straight to the finals, and 16-35 would go again in the semi-finals with the top 5 going to the individual finals.

The next day went pretty much like the first round, any time I felt anxious, I focused on my breathing, which took my mind off the competition, and helped relax me. I had drawn up first, and Robyn 5th.

There's such a thing in sports as being in the zone. I'd read about it, heard about it, but never really experienced it until then. My horse, *Plenty Of Guns*, and I scored a 220, which was a personal best for me. Robyn came in four horses later and went around me to mark a 220 ½. We were both looking like making the individual finals at WEG, until the last few horses went. Robyn ended up in 6th, one spot out of the finals, and I ended up tied for 7th, two spots out of the finals.

It certainly was a testament to the mental side of it, as I was still a bit rusty after not competing for three years. I like to tell people that my physical game was not as good as it had been, but my mental game was at a much higher level, thanks to Jane's coaching and my newfound ability to not think about anything. ■