

How To Boost Your Riding CONFIDENCE

By Traci Schachtner

Your Mind is Racing, Your Heart is Pounding...

At one time or another, everyone has felt it, ranging from a small case of butterflies to a full-blown feeling of nausea. Whether it's caused by a competition, or a fear of losing control of the situation you and your horse are in, we've all been there. Learning how to manage anxiety and control your mental state can help you tame your fears and make your experiences on horseback what they should be - enjoyable and rewarding!

One of the biggest problems riders face is fear. The fear can be anxiety that things will not go well in the competition ring, or caused by a previous accident or situation where the rider felt they were not in control. Other concerns may be looking bad or not being able to perform to the pressure of the moment. Karen Scholl, Horsemanship for Women clinician, says that as women, we have a natural tendency to protect ourselves. Horses are unpredictable by nature and we tend to go into a situation wanting to control, which can sometimes put the horse into survival mode. Scholl says fear can be replaced by knowledge. It's a simple statement, but encompasses a vast array of learning. The more instruction you receive, the more your experience will grow, thereby increasing your skill level. Scholl says to, "use knowledge to set yourself up for success."

"Failure is not failure -it's part of the movement toward accomplishment,"

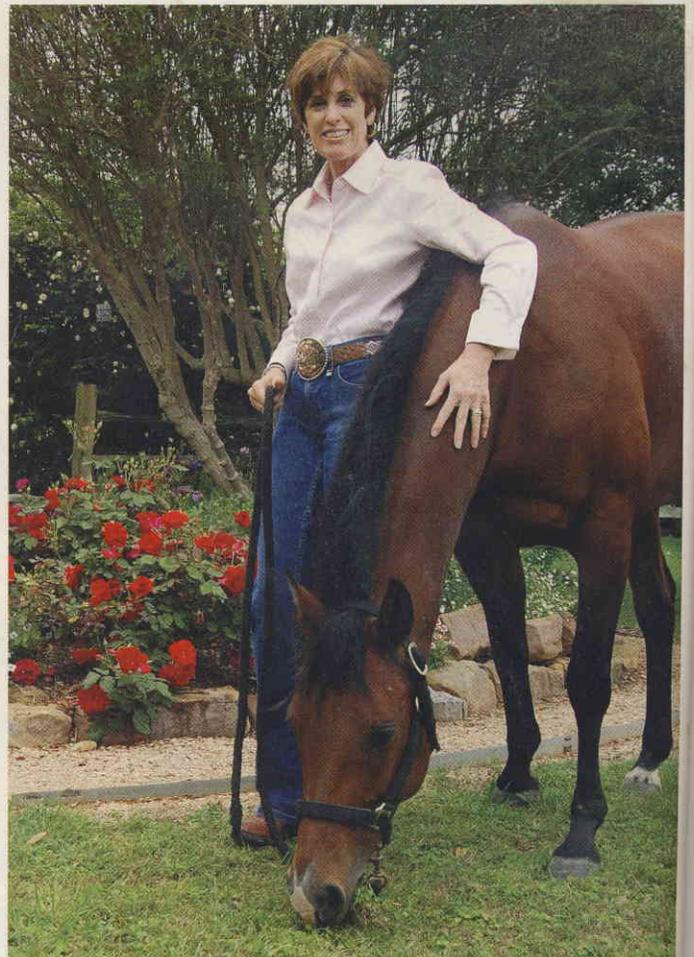
Clinician Karen Scholl

The secret to success is being able to put your fears and anxieties aside and ready your mind for the task at hand. Barbra Schulte, well known author, clinician and cutting horse trainer, says the key is the ability to be in a zone, your "Ideal Performance State." In order to be able to perform your best under pressure, you have to be able to call up this feeling. She says this is a learned skill that even the greatest athletes in the world had to master, it's not just a God-given talent.

Teaching yourself to call up your "Ideal Performance State" is something any rider can do if they are committed to practice. Schulte says ritual is key. Use a specific routine and do the same things every time to get you connected to a calm place. She also says that breathing is a

very effective tool and that by breathing into your core you can relax and think about being connected to your horse. What you do in the ten to twenty seconds prior to entering the arena is key. Replace those renegade thoughts and feelings that pop up with breathing and what you need to concentrate on for your ride.

Because horse shows and competitions are also social events, it's sometimes hard to disengage from visiting and start preparing yourself mentally. So how do you remove yourself from conversation without seeming discourteous? Schulte says to politely excuse yourself or maybe make a plan to catch up with them after your ride. Let them know you



Author, clinician and cutting horse trainer, Barbra Schulte, teaches riders to reach peak performance through building confidence and developing focus. Photo by Diane Holt of Washington, TX H20 Ranch.

Confidence

really want to talk to them but need to prepare. Don't be afraid to let people know when it's time for you to get ready. You are responsible for your own mental preparation. Be friendly and kind, but also think of yourself.

Developing good mental habits and a confidence-building attitude doesn't stop when your ride is over. Schulte says, "Always recognize the good and continue to anchor those positive things in your mind. Make friends with the errors." She says it's also important to learn to realize the difference between something you have control over and something that happens regardless of your actions. If a piece of paper blows across the arena and your horse spooks, that is not something you can control. But now that it has happened you can be better prepared should the situation arise again.

After a bad performance, recognizing what you can do to do better next time - rather than focusing on what went wrong this time - is a proactive way to keep your confidence up and avoid getting discouraged. "Keep trying. Failure is not failure - it's part of the movement toward accomplishment," says Scholl.

Women who compete in male-dominated sports sometimes also have the added mental stress of feeling like they have something to prove. Scholl said this was a challenge she faced as a woman clinician in a mostly male-dominated field. She says everything opened up for her when she quit trying to be "one of the guys." Be yourself and keep your focus, remain gracious and be a classy competitor when faced with circumstances out of your control.

Another issue facing many of today's horsewomen is how to teach their children to be confident riders. With the high-caliber nature of many of today's youth competitions, teaching mental toughness at a young age is vital to keeping kids involved and avoiding discouragement. Both ladies say that keeping the event fun is a major factor. Fun is not synonymous with recreation and there should be a joyful feeling about the activity. Even people at the highest levels are having fun. You need to make sure that your child is going after what THEY want to go after. Help them to control what they have control of and don't blame when things don't go as planned. A clear relaxed and confident feeling, and one that's not too intense is what we need to be helping the child to develop.

Developing your confidence and learning to control your mental state are skills as vital for today's competitor as knowing how to cue your horse properly during your event of choice. Above all, remembering that riding is about having fun will help you keep a positive perspective and make your riding experience more enjoyable for you and your horse.



Horsemanship for Women clinician Karen Scholl helps women build confidence in their relationships with horses.

Kelley
from
Bamshed

COWGIRL
TUFF
JEANS

Retail Locator at
www.CowgirlTuffCo.com