

Practice and conditioning will only get you so far in competition. Mental preparation can be as important as saddle time.

By Katie Navarra

The Mental Side

BEFORE RIDING INTO THE SHOW PEN, LAUREN BOYCHUK, an amateur from Medicine Hat, Alberta, spends at least 10 minutes in her trailer. Alone. Meditating. Sometimes she uses the Calm app, designed to lead users in meditation, mindfulness and focus exercises.

Other times, she turns on the podcast “Ten Percent Happier” with Dan Harris. Dan, an ABC newsman, talks with meditation pioneers, neuroscientists, psychologists, mental health and health experts on the topic of training your mind.

“I used to think meditation was weird and hokey,” she says. “But everyone’s mind wanders. Meditation teaches you to come back and be centered and to let everything go from your mind except what you’re focused on at the time.”

Lauren, the 2016 and 2017 AQHA Select boxing world champion, tried it because her daughter, a professional athlete in Canada, worked with a mental

toughness trainer. The mental toughness training complemented her physical training, and she quickly advanced through the ranks.

“People really hoot and holler and I don’t hear any of it, since focusing on mental concentration,” Lauren says. “I’ve learned to calm my mind and really focus on my horse in the show pen.”

Brandy Baldwin-Bunting of Stanton, Michigan, showed in her first leadline class at 18 months old. As AQHA Professional Horsewoman and judge Christa Baldwin’s daughter, Brandy had the benefit of having an accomplished horsewoman teach her the technical side of riding. But mental concentration is what differentiates the top riders, says the 2017 AQHA All-Around Amateur.

“All the physical preparation in the world will go out the window in the arena, if you aren’t mentally able to handle the experience,” she adds. “Having said

that, the more you physically prepare, the more likely you will remember all the elements or resort to 'muscle memory' when anxiety kicks in."

Professional boxer Muhammad Ali once said, "In the big leagues, everyone has ability. It always comes down to mind games. Whoever is more mentally strong wins."

Winning riders know that controlling their mind, emotions and thoughts contribute to success in the show pen. Coaches often say mental preparation is 90 percent of the game. Developing an ability to cope with psychological stress that comes with elite competition is crucial in today's competitive world.

We've assembled a few tips for developing the right frame of mind to help you separate yourself from the others at your next show.

Mind Games

DEVELOPING THE MENTAL SKILLS NECESSARY to maintain focus is challenging, because mental skills are more fragile than technical skills. Mental toughness can evaporate in stressful situations whereas technical skills stick.

When a focused rider feels the horse moving too quickly in a pivot, rather than getting nervous, the exhibitor reacts and cues the horse to slow the rotation before overspinning. Similarly, in western riding and over-fences classes, riders must have razor-sharp focus and the ability to let a mistake go. Dwelling on a bad stride or bad lead change that already happened means you won't be paying attention to the next maneuver. A lack of focus on course can tally more bad strides or lead changes or, worse, force a rider off-pattern.

"Meditation has helped me focus on what is going on one moment at a time and one stride at a time," Lauren says. "Part of my warm-up routine includes spending time alone with my horse, talking to him and thinking about a pattern. I want to get my horse comfortable and relaxed."

Envisioning a pattern and picturing the class going perfectly helps it become a reality, Brandy says. In pattern classes, it's beneficial to watch the riders ahead of you to visualize your spots and anticipate areas that may be tricky.

"As an all-around exhibitor, I show in a lot of classes at each show, so I am careful to take one class at a time and give as much attention to the next class coming up as possible," Brandy says. "I may look at the later patterns to know what I will have



Amateur Lauren Boychuk has ridden her mental skills to world championships.



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to do, but I try to give my attention to the next class and not get ahead of myself."

Overthinking a pattern or looking too far ahead can contribute to nervousness and anxiety. Those emotions affect the way a person behaves, which in turn influences a horse's reactions. Knowing how much warm-up time each horse needs is an important part of the equation.

"You have to know each horse you ride well enough to know how much to warm them up properly," Lauren says. "Some horses need more time, others less time. I see other exhibitors ride so long that they make their horses mad before they go in and show."

Horses, like people, have a mental and physical capacity. Finding a routine that works for the horse and the rider is key. Green horses or those with more energy likely need longer warm-ups to settle in. Seasoned and laid-back horses usually need less time to prepare for a class.

"I also have two daughters who are now showing, so I don't have very much extra time for over preparation and that may be good," Brandy says. "I know my current mare doesn't need a lot of warmup, so I try to let her relax in her stall until there is enough time for me to feel warmed up and then move right into the class."

Look Like a Champion

PERCEPTION IS REALITY. A JUDGE WHO SEES A CONFIDENT RIDER enter the show pen with self-assurance will take note. An exhibitor who lacks self-confidence relays that insecurity to the judge.

"If you enter the arena looking scared, you are already at a disadvantage, as the judges will quickly see that," Brandy says. "Your horse will also feel your anxiety and lack of communication, and then the horse will assume there is something they should be worried about, as well."

As a licensed professional counselor at Montcalm Community College, Brandy brings her training as a psychologist into the show world. She spends a lot of time being mindful of her tension and her nerves.

"I don't think very many riders are aware of how tense their body becomes when they enter the arena or approach the first cone. Horses can feel that," she says. "We have to stay relaxed so our horses stay relaxed."

Brandy uses a personal assessment to evaluate how nervous she is and what parts of her body are reflecting her nerves. She asks herself:

- How nervous am I?
- Am I "gripping" or "squeezing" too much?
- Are my hands soft and communicating?
- Is my heart racing?

Then she uses breathing techniques to relax her body so she doesn't transfer that energy and anxiety to her horse. Her favorite technique is to take a deep breath in through her nose to the count of four. Then she holds her breath to the count of four and exhales through her mouth to the count of four. Then she repeats it.

"You can Google 'relaxation breathing techniques,' as there are several to try," she says. "You can find one that works for you and find out more about the relaxation impact it has on the body."

Commitment and Follow-Through

PROFESSIONAL BASKETBALL PLAYER MICHAEL JORDAN HAS SAID, "Mental toughness and the heart are a lot stronger than some of the physical advantages you might have."

Improving your concentration and mental preparedness is harder than teaching yourself or your horse the technical skills. Lauren recommends working with a professional who offers online or one-on-one coaching sessions.

"You have to be committed and actually follow through," she says. "It's easier not to do it at all than to do it right, especially when you're late and running to get out the door."

Mental training is part of larger self-realization.

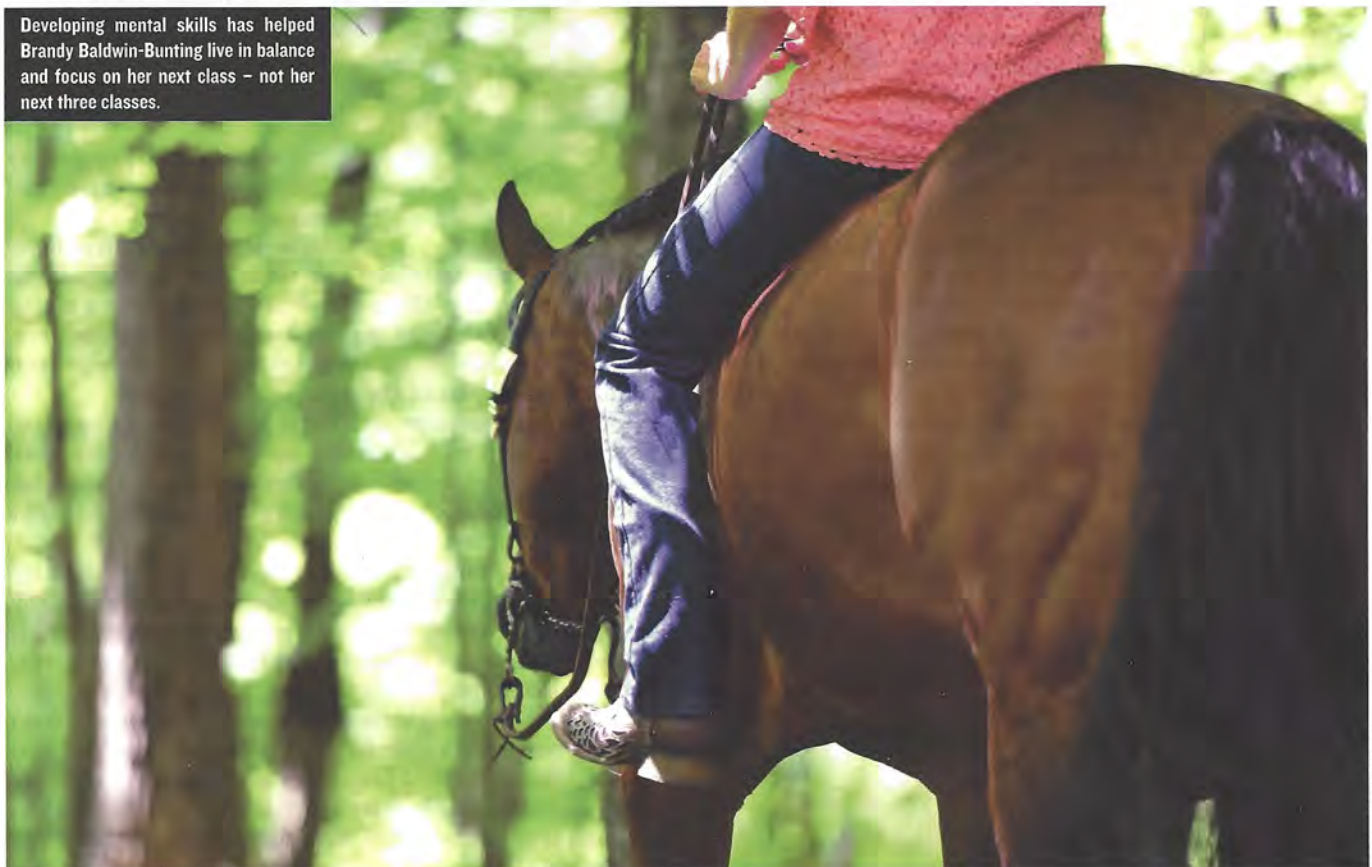
"At the end of the day, if you don't achieve what you want to at that time, you have to figure out why and figure out why you achieved what you did achieve at that moment so you can use it to improve the next time," she says. "You have to be methodical about it."

Horse showing is filled with rotating days of highs and lows. Celebrate and be proud of the achievements. Stay humble and don't stop trying to be better by watching, changing and learning. Doing well, even personal bests, can really boost confidence. Use that confidence to push through and try again.

"We can't go back and change mistakes, but we can remember that there is another horse show and we can try again next time," Brandy says. "Sometimes we become so focused on not making that mistake that we make a different one and that is OK (although frustrating) because that is the key to experience." ■

Katie Navarra is a special contributor to the Journal. To comment, write to aqhajrnl@aqha.org.

Developing mental skills has helped Brandy Baldwin-Bunting live in balance and focus on her next class – not her next three classes.



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