

What's On Your Mind?

Where do a rider's thoughts go as she picks up the canter and her name is announced on the loudspeaker? Looking into the minds of a few riders gives us a glimpse into techniques, tools and habits that are a part of their 90 seconds in the ring.

By Michelle Bloch

TRICIA BOOKER

Francesca Mazella won the USEF Medal and ASPCA Maclay finals 36 years ago. During that 1984 fall indoor show season she became the ninth person in 44 years to win them both in the same year. She was only 15 years old.

I watched her win the USEF Medal Final at the Pennsylvania National Horse Show in Harrisburg, and she was everything I wanted to become as a young rider. I was just a year younger and had my future sights set on the finals. While watching her was influential, it was a magazine article, a first-person account of her ride, that shifted my perspective. I may have stood ringside each week at the shows to watch and learn, but looking into the mind of a great rider was like unlocking a secret vault. As I read her detailed description of every jump, her self-talk through every turn, every stride, it changed how I rode a course forever.

I adopted Francesca's method, but over the years I've learned that each rider creates his or her own way, through strategic plans, rituals and techniques, to find the "zone." At a show we can't see what's going on in our fellow riders' minds, but perhaps taking a peek here can help someone discover their new invisible aid.

Focusing Your Thoughts

There are 70,000 thoughts that go through a person's mind every day. That's about 300 an hour or 75 thoughts for the 90 seconds you're competing in the show ring. Imagine reining in those thoughts and keeping your mind focused by substituting the random, uncontrolled internal conversation with a constructive script.

Young grand prix rider Ryan Sassmannshausen, 28, of St. Charles, Illinois, employs a system of preciseness, organization and planning. He thrives on keeping his mind engaged.

"I try to stay as focused on my plan as much as possible, because it keeps me out of my head," said Sassmannshausen, who knows that creating a plan, riding it in his head and then sticking to it in the ring can result in victory.

He admitted that even at the grand prix level, the destructive words can creep in,



Ryan Sassmannshausen, above, with his mom, Janet, knows that focusing intently on his plan in the ring can result in victory. Below, amateur rider Hunter Messineo has discovered her inner critic starts talking well before she gets to the in-gate.



especially when walking the course.

A recent experience came to mind, and he described an impressive, technical grand prix course at Lamplight. It was one of the biggest tracks his green horse had jumped.

"When I walked the course I thought, 'Eh, this is big. I hope that we can hang in here and not make a fool of ourselves,'" he remembered. "That's the self-doubt creeping in."

A weapon for combating those thoughts can be to simply push them out and replace them.

Jumper rider Laura Connaway, of Little Rock, Arkansas, has a similar strategy to keep her brain engaged.

"I always have a list of three things I tell myself, and those three things keep my brain thinking about what I need to be thinking about," she said. "If I can keep my mind busy doing that, then it won't wander into some dark areas."

The first part of her self-talk is to focus on a specific part of her body.

"When I relax my arms and shoulders, I connect with the horse," she explained. "I

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feel the rhythm of the canter more, and at that point I'm going to see whatever I want to see when I gallop to the jump."

Connaway has identified that one location as her nemesis. "Tension there is tension everywhere else," she added. By giving and releasing in that one area, she relaxes and connects with her horse.

The second thing she tells herself is to gallop until she sees to slow down. This tactic originated from a clinic with Julie Winkel seven years ago.

"That day she said to keep galloping until you see to do something different," said Connaway. "That way, you don't make an

adjustment too early because your eye may not have picked up on it yet. Julie doesn't know, but that made a huge impact on my riding." Connaway called Winkel's words

a "pearl of wisdom."

The third part of Connaway's dialog is to always rebalance from the leg, not the hand. "It works really well in connection with Julie's advice to

gallop," said Connaway. "When I think about those three things, I don't think about unnecessary things, and everything works out."

Hunter Messineo, an amateur rider from Harwood, Maryland, knows her in-

ner critic starts talking well before she gets to the ring. "For me, it comes early," she said. "I need to push it out, which is why I need a complete game plan."

Messineo gets detailed with her plan while on course. "I know where I'm half halting, and I pick points where I know that I'm breathing. I don't like to wing it. If the path doesn't go right, if the fence doesn't go right, I like to know what I need to do to make sure it's only one fence that I mess up."

After she feels prepared, Messineo relaxes and even jokes around at the in-gate. "Once I have my game plan, I don't want to overthink it," she added.

Ryan Sassmannshausen's mother, Janet Sassmannshausen, is the head trainer at their Kinvarra Farm. She's found that a rider's mental game might require different strategies in the hunter ring versus the jumper ring. She said in the hunter ring,

We all need to be grateful in this sport; I think we are so lucky we get to have horses in our lives.—

Hunter Messineo



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track and rhythm are paramount, and it's where a rider's focus should lie. Many trainers will encourage young riders to sing "Row, Row, Row Your Boat" to find the rhythm and keep the mind focused.

Other trainers will suggest a one-two count (one, two, one, two) to find rhythm. Janet and Ryan teach rhythm and feel through a four-count method (one, two, three, four) because it better locks in the rhythm.

"When you're doing a two-count, your mind can take over and speed up the rhythm," said Ryan. "You end up rushing the count in your mind, even if the horse hasn't sped up. It's much easier to keep the rhythm on a four count. And if you do try to speed it up, a four-count becomes very noticeable when you rush it in your head."

Like Ryan, Michelle Durpetti, of Chicago, Illinois, is a planner. The trait, she ad-



Laura Connaway engages in breathwork to help her relax and focus.

JOHN NAILL

mitted, runs down to her cellular level. It's apparent in her successful wedding planning business, the two third-generation family restaurants she helps run in Chicago, and even on her horses.

"I create a plan, and then I execute it everywhere in my life," said the amateur rider.

Durpetti rides with Caitlyn Shiels out of True North Stables in Zion, Illinois.

"Caitlyn would be the first one to tell you that I memorize my plan and talk to myself

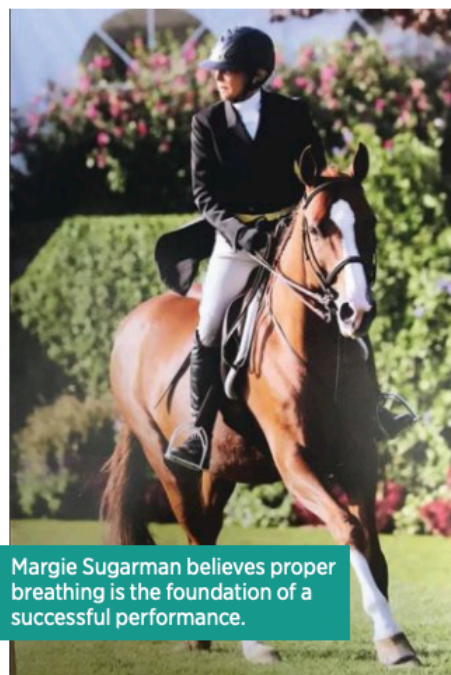
around the ring. If you were in my head ... it's a full-blown conversation in there," said Durpetti with a laugh, who describes herself as a "serial counter."

To work on keeping her conversation in check and her anxiety from getting the best of her, Durpetti uses a combination of tools, including rituals and breathing techniques.

The Power of Breath

Don't take your breath for granted. Pause for a moment and witness yourself breathing. Is it coming from your chest or your abdomen? Is it shallow or deep?

Your breath is a secret tool with transformational powers. Although breathing is an act we typically engage in subconsciously, by practicing conscious, controlled breathing patterns we can create emotional as well as physiological and chemical



Margie Sugarman believes proper breathing is the foundation of a successful performance.

SHAWN McMILLEN PHOTOGRAPHY

changes in the body. Breathing exercises can lower heart rate, blood pressure and cortisol (stress hormone) levels as well as increase oxygen uptake.

Breathwork is a broad term (like fitness) that covers a host of practices. A number of riders use different forms of breathwork to enhance their performances.

Connaway, 54, breeds, breaks and trains her own horses for the Jumpers. She also runs her self-started Connaway & Associ-

ates Equine Insurance Service Inc. But her lifetime of experience in and out of the show ring doesn't preclude her from having doubts creep in on occasion.

"Sometimes I would struggle with feeling like I wasn't as prepared as the other riders. You're around all these people who look like they have it all together, and you wonder if you have it all together," said Connaway, who credits therapist and sport psychologist Margie Sugarman for giving her the tools she uses in the show ring.

Sugarman, a board-certified psychotherapist and sports consultant based in Smithtown, New York, consistently employs techniques such as breathwork and mantras in her practice. Under Sugarman's guidance, Connaway engages in a routine of breathwork she uses at least three times before entering the ring—when she mounts her horse, when there's a break in schooling and again before she goes into the ring.

"[Margie] was a really big help when I talked to her, because I didn't have a coach at home, so she would help go through my issues. She helped me with the mantras, the breathing exercises and allowing me to text or call her," said Connaway.

Breathwork can bring a person out of the sympathetic or high-brain state (fight or flight) and into a more relaxed or low-brain state (parasympathetic) where the body is able to increase its oxygen uptake.

"When you're in a high-brain state and full of anxiety, your brain won't work properly because you don't have mind-body connection," said Sugarman, noting anxiety sets off a chain of physiological events such as shallow breathing, lack of oxygen and a scattered mind.

"The more relaxed we are, the more we breathe from the diaphragm, which is the proper way to breathe, and we get more oxygen," she said. "In a panicked state, you shallow-breathe. If you're in that brain state you're not breathing properly, and your mind isn't in the right place, so you can't ride, either!"

Sugarman believes proper breathing is the foundation of a successful performance. She said, "I always teach breathing



Turning negative thoughts into positive ones creates success in and out of the show ring.

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Thoughts Create Actions

When we say something negative over and over (don't lose your pace to the first jump, for example) your mind becomes imprinted with the negative. Part of Margie Sugarman's therapy is working with a rider to flip a negative to the positive and to create a mantra.

She noted that mantras help us re-imprint our brains with positive reminders, such as "keep that perfect pace."

"Imagine how when you walk on the beach, your footprints depress into the sand," she said. "If you keep standing in the same place or stomping on it, the impression becomes deeper and deeper. What we do (with the positive) is to get out of that print, and we're letting the wave wash over it and let it wash it away. Our thoughts create our actions."



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techniques in the first session. I don't care who you are; if you're an Olympic athlete, we talk about breathing."

Unlike Connaway, Durpetti hasn't worked with a sport psychologist. But she's no stranger to observation and analysis of her own quirks and habits, and is hungry to learn and implement strategies to support her mental game in the ring. Following a bad fall about six years ago, she discovered that breathwork helped with her resulting anxiety.

"I injured my shoulder. But I injured a lot more from an emotional standpoint," she said. "I couldn't get over a cavaletti without having a full-on panic attack. There were times in the ring I blacked out jumping the first jump and had to come out. When I started getting anxiety, I would feel claustrophobic, like I couldn't breathe, even though I was sit-

ting on a horse." Durpetti remembered a horse show in Michigan in the Adult Jumpers when the anxiety was overwhelming.

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"You got to show one class a week in the Grand Prix Ring," she recalled. "The entrance to the ring is down this really long ramp from the schooling ring. So when you're a high-anxiety, terrified rider, you might as well be traveling for two days down that ramp. Caitlyn would have her

hand on my leg and would talk to me all the way there, about the weather, about the course, about the fact that my horse had my back. There were times I would just sit at the top and practice breathing, just remembering how to breathe."

Durpetti forces herself to exhale in the corners and always after the first jump. "I tell myself, first jump down, now you can get to the business of doing the rest of it," she said.

Personal Rituals and Gratitude

Often people employ more than one technique in the ring to keep themselves focused. They may use a combination of planning, breathwork and even rituals. Each person's rituals are unique and meaningful to them.

For Durpetti, who began riding at the age of 9, her grandfather was a central

family-owned restaurants Durpetti manages every day. The connection to her Italian grandfather, whom she lovingly called "Nonno," remains strong, and her bond to him exists even in the ring.

"Every time I walk into the ring, whether it's at Washington, Harrisburg or a small schooling show, I talk to my grandfather. I don't pick up the trot right away, even with my mare who is a little hot. I force myself to exhale, and I say, 'Nonno (Italian for grandfather), keep your hands on my shoulders', and then I pick up my canter."


Durpetti, as well as Messineo and Connaway, also include gratitude rituals in the ring.

"At the end of every round I thank my horse out loud," said Durpetti. "When I was a kid my dad used to say, 'Michelle, win or lose, if you come out on top of the horse, I'm happy.' So I feel like I always owe my horse a little gratitude. Like, 'Thanks for keeping me up here! We made it through.'"

For Messineo, it's the experience. "Every time I walk in the ring, I give my horse a pat because it's my moment to realize how grateful I am that I get to horse show," she said. "I take a deep breath, thankful that I get to enter the ring and anything after that is a bonus. That's how I center myself as I'm going in."

"I'm never chasing year-end stuff," she added. "So I think my attitude is a little different. This sport is a lot of money, and I want to make sure I have fun. We all need to be grateful in this sport; I think we are so lucky we get to have horses in our lives."

Finally, for Connaway, it's about realizing what she gets from the horses in her life.

"I've noticed that jumping horses has to be one of the most in-the-moment activities you can be a part of," she said. "You have to be in the moment every second you're with them, and being in the moment is the happiest and most joyful anyone could ever be. That's what everyone strives for in their daily life, and when you realize that this sport brings you to that, to that wonderful part of living, it's pretty incredible." 



DIANA HADSALL