

PERFORMANCE UNDER PRESSURE

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Before midnight of the Tom Quilty, a moment will occur that will decide the winner before the start is announced. That moment might be the result of practised actions that are engaged and also result of many singular response actions throughout the event.

Just as Olympic athletes suck in their final calming breaths and settle into their starting positions, they'll sense the expectation of the crowd, scan the passing thought of the result outcome and finally face the culmination of a lifetimes training that will either be rewarded with glory or face the challenge of going home with nothing but memories at the end of straining their muscles.

Some of the Tom Quilty horse and rider combinations will take the pressure of that moment and put aside all the worries, and simply concentrate on the horse they are riding and the terrain to their advantage, and others will completely succumb to Quilty fever and completely risk their performance.

Whether you are an Olympic athlete, a regular good endurance rider, on the brink of your first big event or a top ten Quilty contender, performing under pressure is essentially the same game. What it takes to kick off from the start block at the Olympics and launch into history, or ride your horse well enough to complete, gain a buckle or even win a top ten place, is the same stuff you need to reach the heights of personal best endurance performance. The tools you require to manage the pressure of either scenario are actually surprisingly similar.

There are many sources of immediate event pressure and the key to managing them is realising that most are external and out of your control. Managing pressure is all about managing what you can control and parking the rest to one side for that moment when you need to mount up and ride.



Managing pressure is all about managing the direct things that are in your control and recognising the things that are not in your control, accepting them and putting those things to the side.

PLAN



Parking that pressure, whether you're at the Quilty or at a regular endurance ride can be much easier said than done. It requires a good sense of mental toughness, which is built over time.

At the end of the day, the Olympics or the Quilty or a regular endurance ride is really just another event and the processes that

athletes and riders go through at each event are essentially the same.

So you may tell yourself that your next significant endurance event is just another endurance ride, but how do you convince your anxiety riddled brain to focus on the task at hand? Well, maybe you don't need to, according to Tasmanian based performance psychologist Jacqui Triffitt.

There's a big misconception in sport arena in which people think that you need to get your mind just right to perform, but that's not true, "she says. "Mental toughness isn't the ability to get your mind right before an event, its about being able to execute when your mind is saying you can't."

There are four reasons why we fail under pressure. The first is that we don't know what to do; the second is we don't know how to do it; the third is we don't have the ability to do it and the final reason is that we choose not to do it.

Both elite athletes and the average experienced endurance rider have already developed the what, how and ability in order to reach their current positions but often let pressure cloud their choice to execute those existing skills.

For example a competitor recently, who was completely prepared for the event, and looking forward to the event. But on the night of the 100 miler when some things did not quite go according to plan, and then their horse slipped, the rider became more upset and lost concentration, thought they'd missed an arrow, and with the distress over the risk of being lost, following that were a series of reactions that further compromised performance. However they still had the what, the how and the ability. What was happening was that they had made the choice to become distracted. They hadn't suddenly lost their skills.

PREPARATION

So if the key to not dropping the ball when it counts the most lies in making the choice to trust your innate skills and experience, how do we build the emotional resilience to do so when the pressure demons have turned our brains to mush?

The answer is simple: practice makes perfect.

Just like Olympic athletes have to get up in the early hours of the morning and train, endurance riders need to go out approach everyday training and practice not only their riding skills, but also mental skills in advance of a significant event. Get your emotional resilience very strong, so that when you are under pressure, you are able to perform with a clear head.

The first step to building your mental muscles and resilience is understanding what happens to your brain when you're under pressure. As stress builds, blood flow is directed to your emotional brain, which is subsequently hijacked and begins firing off negative emotions such as anxiety and anger. This reaction in turn clouds your rational intelligence, which leads to a short temper and potential anxiety attacks that go hand in hand with stress.

Put simply, emotional resilience is about recognising when an emotional reaction to pressure is building within you, making the choice to resist it and returning to your state of rational intelligence to solve a problem-instead of turning away from it.

You'll have stress as long as you live. So, the question becomes, can you step into stress? Are you strong enough to step into it?

An athlete trains for hours and hours so they have the emotional resilience to perform in the critical moments and sustain that performance. Likewise as you build mastery of the things you encounter during your regular training and at regular endurance events, you'll begin to trust yourself and grow stronger in your ability to step into pressure.

Being realistic about what you can achieve is the key to managing expectations.



ACTION

So, you've planned to enter a ride and you have prepared your emotional resilience to make it happen. But now its ride day and as the pressure builds so do the butterflies in your stomach. Reducing ride day nerves comes down in part to expectation management.

It about being pragmatic about these things, because if you go in with unrealistic expectations and you don't win the World Equestion Games Endurance event, for example, when you had minimal chance of doing so, then you are creating potential for an issue there.

Being realistic about what you're likely to achieve can help keep your feet on the ground, but your preride ritual can be just as important for calming your nerves.



Mental rehearsal of approaches to handling certain competition aspects that impact on performance. Whether that means taking a short walk or going through setting up your gear, and strapping requirements, taking some time to consider what kind of endurance ride performance looks like in your mind before you get on your horse, can make all the difference.

If you are about to start a hundred miler or your very first 80 km ride, centering your mind back on training to focus your mind and reduce your nerves and put aside all the "what if" stories that can take up space in your mind can help focus on your mind on your riding performance. Take a few deep breaths, get ready, saddle your horse, mount up. Most importantly, in your daily training, and regular events find what works for you. You have to fine tune and rehearse these things. Athletes don't

go to the Olympics and try new things. Use your training rides followed by regular endurance rides though a trial and error plan and stick with your plans.

REMEMBER

Most important of all in this sport, you and your horse are a team. Try to redirect your thinking from the “what if” stories and dedicate yourself to concentrating on your horses performance. Good horse welfare is critical to performance, you need to concentrate on how the both of you are performing together.

References:

Dr Rus Harris. *The Happiness Trap* (2011)