

Show Nerves: Fixing the Fear Factor

Follow this expert advice to help you relax in the show-ring.

By Cindy Hale

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You're so excited to be at the show! The in-gate swings open, you nudge your horse into the arena and then... you feel like you're going to pass out. That corndog you ate at the concession stand is about to leap out of your stomach and your feet are numb inside your boots. Quietly you ponder, "Isn't this supposed to be fun?"

If nervousness is ruining your show-ring experience, then perhaps you should heed the advice offered by Karen Waite. Currently working on her doctorate in sports psychology, with an emphasis on equestrian competitions, Waite is an equine extension specialist at Michigan State University. She works frequently with equestrians and offers, "I think that if we can help people get control of their competitive emotions we may be able to reduce the incidence of poor sportsmanship and improve conditions for the horse."

That's a worthy mission, because when a rider is overwhelmed by nervousness he or she is more prone to blaming the horse for mistakes. According to Waite, often that nervousness is actually anxiety brought on by the fear of making a mistake that will cause embarrassment in front of one's peers. In the rider's mind, their self-worth for the day is based on how well they do at the show.

Waite says that such fear may be psychological, "but it may have physical manifestations as well."

She explains that fear can cause physical signs such as muscle tension, which leads to leg cramps and a cardboard stiffness. That makes it nearly impossible to maintain a proper equitation position. And, of course, all of that tension is communicated to the horse, which can result in an anxious, apprehensive animal. Another side effect of nervous tension is stomach disturbances.

"That can lead to frequent trips to the bathroom," Waite says. A competitor herself in All-Around events with her American Quarter Horse Association gelding Pretty Much Zipped, she laughs, "and that's not helpful when you're wearing chaps."

Yet, even world class riders admit to having a few butterflies or a touch of performance anxiety. "Sometimes a little bit of anxiety helps us be optimally prepared for the upcoming class," Waite states. "The feeling of being 'pumped up' can be very useful in show-ring situations. It isn't wrong to have butterflies," she adds. "We just need to get them flying in formation."

However, a consultation with a sports psychologist may be necessary if the sensations become incapacitating. Waite offers examples of more practical exercises, each designed to help the competitor relax. "Often a combination of developing physical relaxation skills such as deep breathing and yoga, combined with cognitive restructuring, which includes developing positive self-talk, may help resolve debilitating anxiety in the show-ring."

In other words, the power of positive thinking can go a long way toward winning a ribbon. Yet Waite also says that tailoring a therapeutic regimen to the individual is important. "For some people, physically moving around, getting a horse ready and working through a pre-show routine can be helpful. For others, that routine may include sitting still and visualizing their performance."

Realizing that show-ring nerves are interfering with the horse show experience is the first step. Then, relaxation techniques can help fix that fear factor. "Relaxing is not something we're automatically good at in this day and age," Waite admits. "Once you've developed the skills, however, you can use them in all areas of life, not just in riding."

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