

# Plan, commit, train and excel: Incorporate sport psychology tips into your 2009 CTR season

By Nicole Vaugeois

As the snow melts and the daylight stays longer, many of you are probably thinking about riding again and selecting which rides you will compete in during 2009. This is the perfect time of year to introduce some sport psychology techniques into your routine to help you set goals and get the most enjoyment and personal growth from riding.

In the sport of competitive trail riding, athletes (yes that is you) are exposed to numerous stresses, distractions and events that are out of their control. When competing, riders manage their horse and reactions to the surrounding environment. Also on the riders mind is the time, distance and terrain of the ride. In this type of setting, the clarity of a riders mental state is key to successful performance and ride experience.

**So what is sport psychology and how can it help you with competitive trail riding? According to Wikipedia “Sport psychology (or sports psychology) is the study of a person's behavior in sport. It is also a specialization within the brain psychology and kinesiology that seeks to understand psychological/mental factors that affect performance in sports, physical activity, and exercise and apply these to enhance individual and team performance. It deals with increasing performance by managing emotions and minimizing the psychological effects of injury and poor performance. Some of the most important skills taught are goal setting, relaxation, visualization, self-talk, awareness and control, concentration, confidence, using rituals, attribution training, and periodization.”**

When kicking off the 2009 season, the following pointers from sport psychology should lead you to maximise your success at CTR events by focusing your mind, training, building confidence and managing anxiety. This article will cover tips on training excellence and in the next newsletter, further tips on performance excellence will be given.

## Training Excellence

As all competitors know, CTR's require a lot of physical strength and endurance of both the horse and riders. Of equal importance, all those hours in the saddle while training is a great time to be preparing your mental state for competition as well.

1. Set specific achievement goals for the year, for your training and for each competition

So what do you want to achieve this year with your horse? Taking time up front to give this some thought has been shown to help competitors plan, focus and succeed. According to Tonya Johnston, a sport psychologist who specialized in equine sports, riders should consider setting goals in different categories – beyond sheer performance. Some of these may include:

- Education goals: What do want to learn about the sport? Or about being successful at a new level?
- Fitness goals: Are you the athlete you need to be to accomplish your goals?

- Technical riding goals: These can be related to your position and technique when riding, as well as training methods for you and your horse.
- Mental skills goals: Strategies to help you prepare effectively for competition, both before and at an event.

Similarly, Tonya tells riders that it is important to distinguish between types of goals. Sport psychologists tend to call refer to two types of goals: 1) Outcome goals: Outcome goals refer to the results of competitions and 2) Performance goals (physical/mental) which refer to successful application of skills. For example, an outcome goal may be to finish in the top five highpoint horse and rider teams for 2009. These types of goals are useful to set as they give you something concrete to strive for and the outcome is an indicator of your success. Remember however, that winning and outcome goals are not totally within our control so you should also set some performance goals that give you concrete regular feedback. For example, you could set a physical performance goal for you or your horse such as carrying yourself correctly in the saddle, or reducing your pulse and respiration score. Or, you could set a mental performance goal (again for you or your horse) that your horse will remain calm during vetting, or that you will not get flustered when temporarily lost.

When setting your goals for the year, here are a few tips to help you craft them, and achieve them.

1. Set specific goals using positive language – for example
  - To add 100 miles to my overall BCCTRA mileage
  - To achieve a minimum of 280 points at each CTR
  - To receive perfect scores for “attitude and behavior” with my new horse
  - To ride my first successful level 2 CTR
2. Make sure they are realistic but challenging – if your goals are too easy and you achieve them without effort, you will lose interest and not achieve your full potential. If they are too difficult, you will lose self confidence and abandon them. Make sure to start with small ones you can achieve and then when you assess, you can always increase them.
3. “Ink it and don’t think it” – it is important to commit to your goals – this is best done in writing where you can see them and monitor your progress. You can also share your goals with a riding partner so they can help keep you honest!
4. Create strategies to support your goals – goals don’t just happen in the mind or on paper. Once written and committed to, devise strategies to help you achieve them. If this requires training with your horse or mental preparation, understand what it will take to get to the goal and get this work onto the calendar.
5. Record and track your goals – consider starting a training logbook for your goals, mileage, and observations.

## 2. Prepare your mind before training

Use the strategies and goals you have made for yourself to help focus your training season. Set specific goals for each training session so you remain focused. For example – “Today’s goal is to have Blaze load calmly into the trailer” and until this happens, your training session is not complete. Remember that when you stop training your horse – he starts to train you. When you set a goal and start down the road with your horse, make sure to complete it or you may reinforce negative habits (i.e.

the horse wears you down after 30 minutes of NOT calmly loading in the trailer so you put him away and decide to try again tomorrow).

3. Use imagery and simulation to mimic actual performance at a competition

There is much evidence that athletes who learn to visualize and simulate what will happen at competition are more successful. For example – you may want to improve the way your horse handles for the vet as a goal. Remembering this when training, you can trot out before putting your horse away until he improves. Or you can use your stethoscope to get him used to P and R. Better yet, ask a friend to mimic the vetting procedure so he gets used to standing for people other than you so the vet doesn't have to hear "wow, he has never done this before!"

4. Practice distraction, mood and stress control so that they can be applied effectively at a CTR

Horses pick up on heightened states of energy from their surroundings. At CTR's this can elevate their pulse and respiration score and put horses in an anxious state. It is vital that riders learn to calm their own nerves during competition so that their horse responds to their energy level and leadership, thereby relaxing as well. Practice noting where your energy is when you are with your horse – and if it is too high (in the shoulders, neck and chest) bring it down with deep breathing, positive thoughts (images of how you want things to go vs. what you don't want to have happen). I have a habit of scratching my horse on the neck during farrier visits and vetting while I focus on relaxing so he has learned that this gesture means he is safe and can relax.

These training tips will help make you more mindful of your reasons for riding in competitions, bring you more focus in your training and more rewards in performance. Set your goals soon, write them down, commit to them and train with them in mind.

*About the author*

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*Further reading:*

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Wikipedia (2009) Sport Psychology. Available at: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sport\\_psychology](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sport_psychology)