

Can “Less Be More” When Riding?

A definition of insanity - "doing the same thing, the same way but expecting different results" – sounds familiar? How often do we keep on and on with a lateral move or new technique in our riding – showing great determination and persistence -yet failing to achieve the result we desire. What other approaches can we try?

Sports Psychology and mental training can sound as attractive as examination day at school! It sounds difficult, 'New Age' or full of psycho-babble! All of which are off-putting at best and intrusive or scary at worse.

Yet the reality is that anyone of us has masses to benefit from learning about how our mind works - meaning the beliefs we hold, and the thoughts and feelings we experience in our daily lives that help or hinder us to achieve the happiness we deserve. As an example have you ever wondered why some days you wake up feeling great and others you wake up feeling a 'bit down' and just can't explain why? Wouldn't it be useful to know what you can do about those 'down' days and imagine how great it can be if the answer was already in your head – you just have to find it and know how to use it? (More of how in a later article).

When using sports psychology with horse riders, I like to bring it to life in a fun, practical way that can be applied to everyday life, not just to horse riding. A good place to start is with 'where you put your attention'. So let's take a non-horsey example to look at some of the concepts involved in 'less is more'!

Take Yoga: if you have practiced yoga (or a similarly progressive discipline) you might have noticed that there comes a point when we struggle to progress beyond a certain physical limit - in a stretch or a pose. We continue to repeat the exercise over and over, doing it the same way hoping one day our body will 'get it' and voila – we'll have that perfect Asana. Or, perhaps we add in some extra effort – some more push or bend, or we tell ourselves over and over to 'keep breathing' (through gritted teeth and determination).

*"Imagination is more important than knowledge" – **Albert Einstein***

In yoga our breakthrough moment can come when we approach the situation from a different perspective. Next time you are struggling with your standing pose – instead of focusing on a spot on the horizon, or focussing on the equal distribution of weight in your standing leg's foot (both appropriate techniques) – come away from the problem area and focus on another point of your body: put your focus of attention onto the crown of your head and tell yourself to rise to the sky from that point. Stretch up tall from the roof of your head and notice how easily you balance in the pose.

Or, next time you are in a forward bend and at that point beyond which you never manage to go...close your eyes! This will instantly allow you to achieve more of a stretch as you feel your body soften and the stretch deepen. Notice how when we shut out our ability to measure our progress (other than by feel) our bodies respond and move more naturally towards the very goal we desire. All with less effort not more!

Let's examine both examples to see what's happening and how we can apply the learning to horse riding.

Key Learning Points:-

1. We have to remember NOT to keep on doing the same thing the same way; instead, **we have to seek out a change** in what we are doing. With our riding – we have to know when we have hit a roadblock and stop hitting it.
2. Using the 'techniques' we have learnt (in riding or yoga) is a valuable starting point and helps us get some of the way towards the result we desire. **Riding is about 40% technique** so we don't want to miss out on those riding lessons or stop working with our trainer to improve the technical aspect of our riding.
3. **Technique alone is rarely enough!** Once our performance hits a plateau we must find new and different solutions to see a step improvement. That's where our intuition, curiosity, having people on the ground, watching video recordings of us ride etc all have a valuable role to play.
4. **Step improvements come from simple alterations.** In the first example of the standing pose, the standing foot, leg, and core of the body work to maintain the balance. To improve the pose we took our attention to another part of the body – in this case the crown of the head (not the body parts doing the physical work). With our riding if we focus over and over on for example opening the hips – too much focus can result in tension in the hips, lower leg and back. Next time you want to soften your hips or legs while riding – move your attention elsewhere; try this: **think about the space between your toes** and see what happens!

"We can't solve a problem by using the same kind of thinking we used when we created them." – Albert Einstein

5. **Be creative with where you put your attention** and be willing to experiment. If a change in your focus of attention doesn't bring the desired result, move it to another part of your body and keep moving it around. Consider focussing on a different aspect of your horse's performance too. Do something different for a few minutes. Our horses easily get mentally bored and physically tired so follow your nose – if you feel frustrated maybe your horse does too! Make a change to your riding, your focus of attention, or the routine you are following to re-inspire you both.
6. **Stop making it hard work!** Try and simplify what you are doing. The more we wrestle with heels down, elbows soft, look forward, hips open, lower leg on girth, etc, the less space there is to a) enjoy your riding and b) ride with feel and intuition. Instead, ask yourself: "what can I feel in my body – what sensations and emotions are there?" "What can I feel from my horse – resistance, straightness, willingness, etc" "What does my gut instinct say would be a useful thing to do right now" or "How can I make this fun for us both?"

"Everything should be made as simple as possible..." – Albert Einstein

What have we learnt?

As soon as you take your attention away from the area of body that is working hard, (in a physical way) – your brain indirectly receives the message for that part of your body to now relax as it simply isn't the focal point anymore. **It is often through relaxation that more can be achieved.** Anyone working in a stressful environment knows how 'brain frozen' one becomes when under too much stress. Take the stress away, and your creativity flows again.

Realising that by taking your attention away from something, creates the space needed to do the very job you were wanting in the first place is a fascinating concept and almost feels counter intuitive.

Practice these 6 tips when riding:-

1. **Have your goal for the session** but don't be fixed on *how* you get there!
2. **Give yourself and your horse space** – physically and mentally to just 'be' – allow moments in the ride to simply 'go with a movement' don't insist on it being an exact way – be flexible.
3. **Work from acceptance versus struggle!** Work with what you've got – keep your riding alive and interesting and ride a different movement if progress isn't forthcoming. Return back to it later on.
4. **Less technique and more intuition!** – make your mind work away from the problem by making adjustments elsewhere in your body or in how you are asking your horse to work. (Think yoga)!
5. **Make it easier not harder.** Don't try so hard! Do less - physically. Learn to become still in body and mind.
6. **Imagine yourself** (in detail) riding the way you want to and imagine you have already achieved it. Allow yourself to feel how great it is!

One of the reasons I enjoy yoga so much is that it allows me to work with my body intuitively and to develop a **feel from the inside** about how my body is responding. Instinctively I know that this is a stronger place to work from for the longer term and for establishing muscle memory without a fight! Isn't that similar to the goals we have for riding our horses?

I believe that yoga and horse riding are not just about determination and trying harder but are as much about finding your own way of riding or doing yoga and accepting what your body and horse can do. From this starting point of acceptance we allow the body to breakthrough existing performance levels to make a step improvement – it really is all about giving ourselves permission to just be! Experimenting with the simple assets at your disposal such as breathing, placement of your focus of attention, using your imagination and letting go of expectations are all helpful in the process of - 'less really becoming more'!

For more information on how mental training can help you in everyday life, and when riding your horse - contact Debbie at info@jigsawequine.com