



Focus, friends and quiet time for pre-ride ringside observations are among effective methods for managing show-related stress.

by Clara Bonomi

As a rider and frequent competitor, I know for a fact that stress plays a significant role in my mindset. Juniors seem to experience a unique form of tension that surrounds perfectionism, a lack of confidence, and most prominently, a pressure surrounding winning.

I asked four juniors from various locations and barns across the West Coast how competitive stress affects them, more specifically how they prepare themselves for a competition.

“I mainly feel stress when I’m warming up, which then can transfer over to the show ring,” says Leyton Hillard, a rider at Silver Bay Stables in Sonoma County. “For example, if I don’t necessarily have the strongest warm-up or it’s really chaotic then I start to get thrown off of my game.”

November 2020 - Pressure Relievers

Written by Clara Bonomi
Friday, 30 October 2020 01:22

However, many riders, including myself, experience stress while focusing during their actual round, rather than beforehand. I spoke to Skyler Allen, one of my barn-mates from Sonoma Valley Stables, about her experience with this type of tension.

“I find myself only focusing on what I’m stressed about and then everything else just disappears,” Allen tells me. “[My horse] is really sensitive, so then he’ll get stressed out as well and it all just starts turning into the snowball effect.”

I found that other juniors also had a similar feeling of anxiety in the ring when one thing appears to be going wrong for them. Another one of my barn mates, Danielle Park, expresses that this is something she frequently experiences while competing.

“I get really stressed about being perfect,” she says. “Normally for me, once I make one mistake on course, I feel like it all starts to fall apart. I think one of the biggest things for me is that, the second I start thinking about points, everything starts to go downhill in my mind.”



However, some riders find a more general struggle with self-esteem, which then leads to stress. I spoke about this with Ella Cate Duke of Oz Inc. located in Canby, OR.

“For me, it’s more a lack of confidence,” Duke remarked. “I’ve been working really hard on focusing solely on my ride and the course and how my horse is feeling, but when those things don’t come together, I start to lose faith in my ability to ride.”

Personally, I find myself the most stressed when I feel pressure to ride well for my fellow competitors, trainers, parents, or friends, whether that pressure be intended or not. A lot of my stress comes from a place of feeling the need to satisfy others rather than myself, something

that I should prioritize instead.

The fear of being criticized from those who are not the judge often makes me uncomfortable and results in a more distracted and chaotic round. Even though everyone has had different experiences with stress and anxiety, I can relate with all of these riders. Feeling the need to nail everything, and giving up when that doesn't happen, which is rarely the case, is often a common issue among junior riders, including myself.

Management Strategies

However, through years of riding and showing, these same athletes have found ways to deal with their stress and transform it into something more useful.

"Before I get on, I try to really take time for myself to just relax and listen to music or polish my boots," Hillard says. "I think the most important thing is making sure that my trainer and I have a solid plan not only before I go in the ring, but also before I even get on my horse."

Thoroughly planning and preparing is a common and, in my opinion, very helpful de-stressing strategy for many riders, regardless of whether they are showing or even riding at home. According to Allen, choosing specific goals for each ride can also be beneficial.

"I always try to pick just three things to focus on for my round," she tells me. "Having everything structured out and making sure that I always have a backup plan also makes it much less stressful for me."

Methods used in warm-up rings and pre-ride reminders also help a lot of riders.

"Counting every stride and tuning into the rhythm of my horse, even when it isn't necessary, definitely helps me calm down sometimes," Park explains. "I also always try to remember that I'm not at a show to win, I'm there to have fun and to gain experience."

However, some athletes find that preparing themselves for competition away from the barn environment is more helpful than not. Duke tells me that spending time both alone and

surrounded by others helps her reduce stress.

“Being able to sit next to the ring by myself and hear riders and trainers talk about the course is really useful. Hearing more than one perspective can help me learn from other’s mistakes and feel more prepared,” Duke says. “I also sometimes spend time with friends before I show because I feel like they ground me and remind me that this opportunity should be considered more of a fun experience rather than a mission to win.”

It is clear that juniors from different barns and areas all have unique ways of coping with stress, but most of them can relate that it plays a definite role in their competitive mindset. All competitive juniors experience stress, and most of it is self-inflicted. Whether it’s overly focusing on winning, perfectionism, or desire to please others, such stress takes away from rider’s ability to perform their best and enjoy their time in the saddle. Fortunately, the riders I spoke with are aware of their stress and actively pursue ways to relax and remember to ride.

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