

KRISTA WILSON: WORTH THE TRUST SPORT PSYCHOLOGY ADULT AMATEUR RECIPIENT

By Krista Wilson

Both mentally and physically, eventing is a demanding sport whose three different phases require intelligence, training and competing skills, and bravery. At any competition level, an eventer can experience problems such as loss of confidence, fear of injury, inability to focus, or to perform effectively under pressure. Often, an individual is unaware of self-talk or habits that are counterproductive. Discussion with a qualified sport counselor can help that eventer develop the insight and desire to identify and implement more productive attitudes and behaviors. This process can illuminate and enhance the eventer both as a person and as a rider. The Worth The Trust Sport Psychology Scholarship has been created to provide event riders with this opportunity.



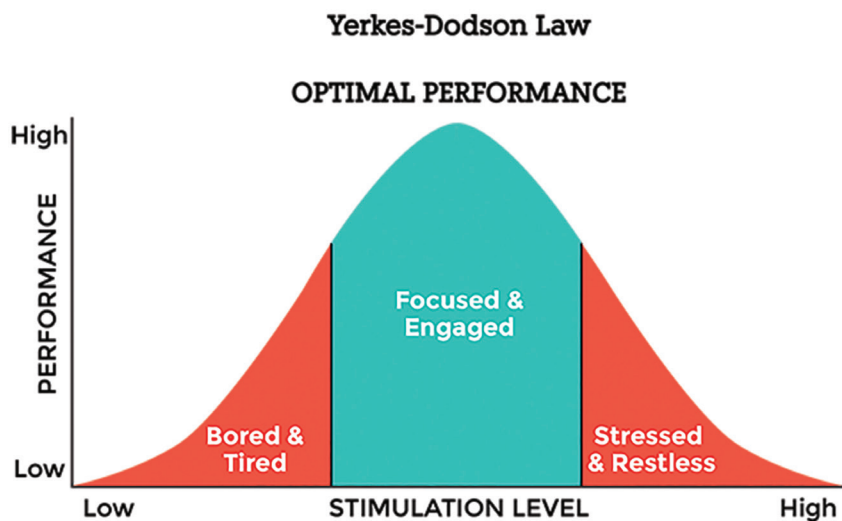
Krista Wilson and Stella.

Imagine you are trotting down centerline, concentrating on feeling the trot steps. One-two, one-two, one-two: the trot is nice and steady. Your body feels relaxed and that is translating to your horse. The connection feels steady, light and . . . oh my gosh – here comes the judge – you have been so fixated on the way the horse feels that now you don't remember whether you turn right or left! Now, you are tensing up, hoping that you will turn in the correct direction! Has this scenario has ever happened to you? Whether you are in the middle of a dressage test or a show jumping round, you are not alone. As an amateur event rider for the past 15 years, I definitely have had some of these moments. Dressage has helped my riding, but I still struggle with getting the horse on the bit and feel. When I ride dressage tests, sometimes I forget the test and go off course. I have tried many strategies to help me with the performance anxiety. Sports psychology is not something I would automatically think of as a way to deal with these issues, but when I read about the USEA Worth The Trust Sport Psychology Scholarship, I wrote an essay and was so fortunate to be chosen as the recipient. The more tools in your toolbox, the better you can be. After reading an article in *The Chronicle of the Horse*, I found Erin McGuire, Sports Psychologist at Remarkable Athletic Solutions. I spoke with her and signed up for her six weeks of "boot camp." Her boot camp is a great introduction to equine sports psychology and she thoughtfully tailors the boot camp to the individual. The sessions were enlightening, positive, and definitely helped improve my mental game of riding.

In the first session, we got to know each other a little better and I learned about the three phases of boot camp:

awareness, tools, and application. I explained to Erin that after selling two horses that were not suitable for my eventing goals earlier in the year, I found a new prospect named Stella. Stella is a six year old 15.2 warmblood mare who had been doing a little walk, trot, and canter when I found her in an online auction. Erin and I discussed where my self-awareness was as well as the quality and quantity of my thoughts.

We looked at the Yerkes-Dodson Curve – a graph that shows the relationship between arousal (attention, adrenaline, and awareness) and performance specifically as it relates to competition. At competitions, sometimes I freeze right before I go into the dressage



ring and lose focus. Sometimes I go off course. This does not happen when I am jumping. We discussed how I tend to put more pressure on myself at recognized competitions versus schooling shows. The recognized shows are more expensive and you have to braid. For me, the show feels more intense than a schooling show. I have more experience with schooling shows than recognized shows.

For dealing with the negative thinking and loss of focus, we came up with some replacement thoughts that were positively phrased, like "squeeze Stella forward into the contact" as opposed to "don't pull her head down into a frame." Thinking about what you DO want to do, rather than what you DON'T want

to do and catching my self-talk during these stressful times was a homework assignment.

We also touched on things that were in the realm of my control- like pace, track, use of aids, versus things that were not, like weather, time of day I show, other people's words and actions. The goal moving forward was to focus on things within my control. This was a huge idea with real benefits in the ring.

In the next three sessions, we set SMART goals (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, and Time-bound) as well as addressing visualization and breathing. Before we put them into the format of SMART goals, my goals were to get better at dressage, and to eventually move up to Training level with Stella. A SMART goal I wrote was to "qualify for the Southeast Schooling Championships show at entry level and to place in the top three." That fit the criteria of specific, measurable, achievable, relevant and time-bound. Having a plan that included long term goals with short term steps to get there created a road map with check points along the way.

Without the help of my trainer, Rebekah Simmons, I was not going to accomplish much, so I sent my new horse to train with her for a month. Stella's confidence and my own improved as we worked hard on our goals. Rebekah had me work on developing a "feel" while riding dressage. Part of that program included me working on sitting trot, which I had previously avoided like the plague. Rebekah was very encouraging and we were able to attend some schooling shows at Florida Horse Park and Majestic Oaks. Rebekah relocated to Ocala from Pennsylvania this year and I have really enjoyed training with her. She has a wealth of knowledge and is a good communicator. Her patience, encouragement and calm demeanor helped me immensely. By keeping it simple, with sayings like "shoulders →



Krista Wilson and Stella. *Lisa Madren Photo.*



Florida Horse Trials Association members celebrating our successes at the Southeastern Schooling Show Championships.

back” while approaching the jump, I actually retained the information. I sometimes get ahead of the horse’s motion, which puts the center of gravity over the neck, thus making it harder for the horse to jump the jump. I was very encouraged by the progress we made.

We qualified for our championship by earning volunteer hours and getting the required scores at shows. Our dressage also steadily improved, and I developed a more realistic attitude

towards that part of the sport. It is a long slow process, so I was reminded by Erin to celebrate the successes along the way. The jittery nerves before going in the ring have not completely subsided, but my self-talk has changed from derogatory, things like, “oh no, Stella’s head is up and her back is inverted, plus she is ducking behind the vertical,” to positive things like “my back is tall, my shoulders are back and I know the test.” Notice how this changed the focus from “oh no, the horse is doing this!” to “oh, you can do this and here is specifically how to get there!” What a difference self-talk makes!

The breathing exercises were something I used to slow my thoughts down and de-stress. By making sure I was “belly-breathing” during the dressage warm-up, I was able to dial down my show-ring nerves.

Visualization was more than just going through the test in my head repeatedly. Mentally rehearsing the course by adding as many details as possible was something I needed to be in a quiet place to do. When rehearsing the round in my mind, I would add things that my coach might say like,

“shoulders back” or “leg on” before the jump as I was going around the course. The mental rehearsal was something I could easily incorporate into my routine at a horse show. At this point, I was really amazed by just how much the boot camp was helping my riding! The new tools that I had been given by Erin were really starting to pay off in my riding and most importantly, my attitude.

The final two lessons of boot camp had me looking at resilience and confidence. Resilience is the capacity to recover from difficulties and is sometimes described as mental toughness. The four “Cs” of mental toughness are commitment, control, challenge, and confidence. All of these are on a continuum. You can have more or less of any of these on any given day. Resilience is one of my favorite words or character traits. The irony of resilience is that you have to go through tough times to develop it. The four Cs come in handy when things go awry. You take a step back and identify the weakest link. Ask yourself questions like: Am I learning from my experiences? Can I manage my emotions? Am I pushing myself to succeed? Do I believe I can do this?

When I first took Stella out cross-country schooling she had no love for water. In fact, she was deathly afraid of it. My trainer, Rebekah patiently schooled her and got her to overcome her fear. Next, she taught me how to ride through the water with a less than confident horse. Each time we went schooling, I saw steady improvement. Eventually, we went out cross-country schooling with a friend, whose pony had never been through water. Stella gave the pony, Watson, a lead through the water when he had serious concerns. How remarkable that my horse gave another one a lead into something that she was terrified of two months prior!


Weeks five and six wrapped around the Southeastern Schooling Show Championships at Chattahoochee Hills in northwest Georgia. This was an exciting time. I had the opportunity to put everything I had been learning into practice while going out of town to the championship. My horse was prepared, and so was I. We had never traveled that far for show before. I was pleasantly surprised by how well Stella handled all the traveling and the show

itself. She ate and drank normally, plus she seemed at ease on the property and in the trailer.

One important idea that I took with me to Chattahoochee Hills was that, “Confidence is a belief, it is not a feeling.” I found that I can take control of my confidence by preparing to think confidently, rather than hoping to feel confident. Confidence is also multi-dimensional – I have lots of confidence in my ability in show jumping and not as much in my ability in dressage and cross-country. That means that I need to do those things to lead me to feel confident in the two weaker areas. Once at the show, I used the tools I had been taught such as “riding my plan” and “monitoring my self-talk” as I was riding.

We were in first place after dressage with one of the lowest scores of the entire show. I was excited and nervous! We had an unlucky pole at the last jump in show jumping, and cross-country was fabulous. Although we did not have to do the water on cross country, because it was not flagged, we went through the water just for the experience. Stella was listening to my aids, and I was able to manage my emotions and enjoy the process. Stella and I had just gone around a championship course that we had never schooled before!

I celebrated getting reserve champion with my friends from Florida Horse Trials Association who also attended. Everyone had a great show. The people at Chattahoochee Hills put on a fabulous show – complete with a parade of riders at the beginning, a photo booth for horse and riders, a pizza dinner on Friday, and a wonderfully catered banquet on Saturday with awesome prizes. Hugh Lochore was the MC at the banquet and he also did a course walk for show jumping.

My real lessons from the boot camp were to enjoy the moments, to have confidence in my abilities, and to trust the process. For someone who can really get sidetracked by her own “stinking-thinking,” I felt that the lessons from Erin really paid off at this event. How very fortunate I was to earn this scholarship! I want to thank everyone at the USEA and Joan Goswell for this wonderful opportunity to improve my riding. 



Driving:

For when a change in pace doesn't mean slowing down.

Photos by Abbie Trexler for ADS.

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