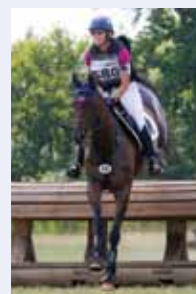


# Eventing: *The Mental Game*

BY MARCIA KULAK



**ABOVE:** Marcia Kulak masters the mental game aboard Michelle Chester's Yoscha Bosche at the 2010 Land Rover USEA American Eventing Championships. EMILY DAILY PHOTO



*Marcia Kulak...* is an advanced-level rider and trainer based in Scotia, New York, and Wellington, Florida. As an international rider for 25 years, she has successfully competed at Rolex Kentucky, Burghley, Blenheim, Boekelo, and Fair Hill. In addition, she has been short listed for two Olympic Games.

*Have you ever wondered what sets a great rider apart from a good one? What is it about those competitors who are consistently successful at any level with a variety of horses? Is it riding talented horses, having sponsors, or just plain luck?*

CERTAINLY THOSE FACTORS HELP, BUT OVER THE LONG HAUL, THE ONE INGREDIENT THAT EVERY SUCCESSFUL COMPETITOR HAS IN ABUNDANCE is a strong mental skill to compliment good riding. Recently, there has been a great deal of press about our elite forces, particularly the Navy Seals. Do some reading about their training regime and figure out how you personally can benefit on a smaller scale from their disciplined mind over matter approach.

So, what's the secret? How does one acquire the mental skills to go along with the physical skills necessary for safe and successful riding?

It's important to start early. For a young rider it's about being exposed to these skills and educated as soon as possible. Good horsemanship and coaching should help riders become mentally strong as well as physically skilled. If it's not in your program now, go find it.

For the adult amateur, awareness is power. If you feel something in your program is missing and your nerves are getting the better of you, ask for help. Most coaches and trainers realize that many emotional factors and fears ("junk in the trunk") creep into adults' heads. It's important to address it early, especially if you find yourself going off course, forgetting your dressage test, or getting physically sick more often than not. Don't ignore those signs or shift the responsibility. Seek out some help. There are excellent books, DVDs, and sports psychologists that can put the fun back into the sport for you!

## What defines "Strong Mental Skills"?

*These are some key elements:*

- The ability to focus completely on a task regardless of outside pressures or distractions.
- Thrive under pressure. Do your skills blossom when the pressure's on?
- An even temperament with horses and people, particularly when things aren't going quite your way. This is called emotional control.
- A realistic, positive outlook, no matter what.
- The ability to continue to produce when physically and mentally tired.
- The ability to bounce back from adversity; think Boyd Martin and the True Prospect Farm crew.
- A strong sense of purpose.
- Good leadership skills; a key ingredient every good horse person has.
- An inner will to succeed with short term goals that facilitate the long range plan.

## Discipline Begins At Home

If you expect to be competitive at events, you must be competitive at home. That means when you ride, you must raise the bar, and make every exercise count. Why is this so important? Mentally at home we think we can just “do it over.” Well, you don’t get a do-over in competition, so why give yourself so many at home? That philosophy cultivates mediocre riding and sore, sour horses. Of course, repetition is important, but it should be good repetition.

In my own riding and teaching, I apply lots of pressure to get the small details correct. I believe most riders don’t focus sufficiently on the basics. We all want to go run and jump the bank and the water, but struggle to trot straight down the center line or canter the flower boxes correctly. I put all my students, my horses, and myself in competition mode right from the get go. I don’t mean barking out orders and kicking horses around. Instead, I use a calm, methodical presentation of the day’s lesson, with an emphasis on correct and intelligent riding. If you develop good habits at home, you will generally have more success at the events!

## Competitive Planning

Preparation is the key. Have a dry run, or several, through your dressage tests. Have

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a plan for cross-country warm-up and show jumping. This will help you alleviate the negative effects of competition nerves. Keep your focus on the job at hand and be sure you feel adequately prepared. Discuss the plan with your trainer and implement their advice. If you figure out what it takes to get the best out of you and your equine partner, the fun factor will increase exponentially.

Once at the event, stay organized. Nothing unravels people more than chaos. Keep your equipment and stabling neat. It doesn’t have to be fancy, but tidiness will definitely create a smoother flow.

Manage the things that are in your control. For example, know your dressage time, what ring you’re in, where the warm-up is, which way to jump the warm-

### *Here are a few simple exercises that anyone can integrate into their program without much trouble:*

- **Remember, to be good at anything requires commitment.** One must accept that the way you are or the way you ride didn’t happen overnight and problems won’t get fixed overnight either!
- **Be strong, accept ownership of your weaknesses, and take the necessary steps to improve.** You must have an appropriate plan and implement it faithfully.
- **Embrace a willingness to learn.** Be hungry for knowledge. Find a way to improve anything in your program. That doesn’t mean go hop scotching to new instructors, products, feeds, instructors, or bits everyday. You want to practice careful evaluation of new and sound concepts that can be integrated into your program. Get a tool box and fill it up; when you think it’s full, go get another one.
- **Practice discipline.** If you would like to ride at a higher standard, you must uphold that standard with every ride. Horses are clever assessors of our game; the minute you sit in the saddle they are going through their checklist to see just how serious you are about today’s ride. If they can get away with you doing most of the work, they will. Be a good leader, not a passenger. So often I see students rise to the occasion in a lesson or clinic, but as soon as I turn my back they are right back to their old, sloppy habits. When you get on, discipline yourself for that 45 minutes or so to put everything else aside and ride at or above your standard. It is easier said than done, but crucial to improving your skills.
- **Take ownership of your strengths and weaknesses.** Be aware of the blame game. My horse doesn’t go well when it’s windy (horse’s fault); my trainer was riding other horses and didn’t give me enough attention in the warm-up (trainer’s fault); the judge was unfair in their scoring (judge’s fault). Focus on the details that allow you to perform your best at whatever level you ride.
- **Take ownership of your end of the deal—Rhythm, track, balance, and get it done.** No more excusing your way around it.

up fences, the correct studs, where your clothes are, know your test and courses inside out, and where your medical armband is before you get to the cross-country warm up. These are examples of factors that minimize mental stress and allow you to ride up to your potential.

Watch out for toxic and contagious negativity. Friends or fellow competitors who constantly talk about how horrible the footing is, how big and scary the ditch is, or how so-and-so jumped the warm-up fence the wrong way and didn't get eliminated. These are all things you have no control over or cannot change. They will however seriously dilute your mental energy and focus. Politely keep these folks at arm's length and keep your thoughts positive.

Embrace your supporters. Every competitor has a close circle of supporters, be they family, friends, owners, sponsors, coaches, vets, or farriers. Be sure to treat

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these people with the utmost respect and kindness. Most of our closest allies will put up with a moment or two of a difficult attitude. However, a steady diet of that is hard to swallow. Also be very careful not to alienate the very people who make it possible for you to compete and be successful. They are your life blood. The true test of a person’s character is how they behave when things don’t quite go their way. Eventing is a character testing sport. Make the most of it or perhaps find something easier.

Control your Emotions. There will be times when a competition, regardless of how well you prepare, goes poorly. This is when the ten-minute rule (15 if you ride Advanced) is useful. Go somewhere

private and be upset. Then get on with setting up an appropriate plan to address the issue. Be careful not to air your displeasure in public. Inevitably, you will feel like an idiot when the emotional dust settles. It may also reflect poorly for a future owner or potential sponsor. Adult amateurs, set a good example of how to handle a less than ideal performance for younger riders who may be at the event helping you.

These are also general life lessons, so use them wisely and take them seriously. Competition is important, but how lucky are we to be concerned about four faults, a good extension, or being inside the time? There are many less fortunate people just trying to put food on the table or pay their mortgage. Be grateful to compete in this amazing sport on open land. Regardless of how bad you think you may have it, someone always has it worse. Put a positive spin in your life and go have fun!

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