

A Rider's Guide to Sports Psychology

By Dr. Margot Nacey

Are You a Healthy Competitor?

Try this mini-quiz and see if you are a healthy competitor.

1. **Do you find it difficult to sleep the night before a competition?**
 Never Sometimes Often Frequently
2. **Do your joints or muscles sometimes ache after a competition?**
 Never Sometimes Often Frequently
3. **Do you forget part of your performance pattern, test, or course?**
 Never Sometimes Often Frequently
4. **Do you focus on your mistakes and run them over in your head?**
 Never Sometimes Often Frequently
5. **Do you feel that your self-worth as a horse person is based on your performance in competitions?**
 Never Sometimes Often Frequently

If you marked 5 questions with a "sometimes" or "never" response, you're probably a healthy competitor with a normal level of anxiety. If you answered "often" to 4 or more questions, you could probably benefit from anxiety reduction training. If you answered "frequently" to 3 or more questions, try to begin training in sports psychology.

With a healthy mental attitude toward competition, you and your horse can both benefit. This outlook gives you the best chance for consistent and winning performances. And because your interest extends past winning, both you and your horse can remain vigorous and happy, with the stamina and interest to remain life-long competitors.

How many healthy competitors do you know? What are the secrets of their positive attitudes toward showing and competing?

Here are a few key ingredients. As a healthy competitor, you should always:

- Remain open to change and willing to take sensible risks in order to grow.
- Take good care of yourself and your horse. Always be willing to put your animal's health and happiness ahead of winning a ribbon.

- Keep a good sense of humor and perspective about competing. Even if you blow a class, realize that there will always be another horse show or event.
- Stay humble, yet quietly assured. Don't limit yourself with negative talk, and remain true to your values even under pressure from peers.
- Recognize signs of stress in yourself and/or your horse, and do something to relieve them immediately.
- Acknowledge your mistakes and learn from them.

In summary, you are a successful equestrian competitor if you are sincerely interested in the welfare of your horse, you have a strong sense of humor and perspective about the ribbons you do or don't win on a given day, and you are patient and kind to your horse, your fellow competitors, and yourself.

Please send any questions or concerns to Dr. Margot P. Nacey, 1630 25th Avenue, Greeley, CO 80631.

Dr. Nacey was an A.H.S.A. steward and dressage technical delegate for 15 years; she came from a family of professional horse people and started competing when she was nine. Margot is a licensed clinical psychologist and has been in private practice for 15 years. She is the director of The Northern Colorado Center for Learning Disorders and on the faculties of The University of Northern Colorado and Lesley College.