



31 07 2013: MEDIA RELEASE

Sport psychological skills in jumping riders

Key psychological elements of jumping rider's expertise identified

While rider athleticism and physical skills play a role in the sport of show jumping, researchers recently focused on the equally important psychological skills riders possess, such as attentional and emotional control, and the ability to manage negative thinking.

Understanding those psychological skills is what drives Dr Inga Wolframm from the University of Applied Sciences Van Hall Larenstein in Wageningen, the Netherlands. "Those incredible mental skills are the ones that fascinate me to this day. What are they? Can we teach them?" Research from other sports has shown that such skills play an important role in the success or failure of athletes, but to date, no such studies have been conducted on equestrians. Dr Wolframm and her research partner Elin Ottersky devised a study aimed at finding out exactly what those mental skills are for competitive show jumpers.

The Test of Performance Strategies (TOPS), a self-report instrument designed to measure the sport psychological skills and strategies used by athletes in competition and during practice was adapted to equestrian sports (TOPS-E).

The research team recruited 73 American show jumping and hunting riders, of international, national and regional levels of competition in Ocala, Florida, USA. Prior to competition, the riders completed the TOPS-E. The aspects assessed were: self-talk; emotional control; automaticity; goal-setting; imagery; relaxation; negative thinking; and attentional control.

The most significant finding for researchers surrounded automaticity. Years of careful practice in show jumping leads to elite riders having automaticity: the ability to unconsciously perform physical acts such as delivering the aids when riding. Research results indicated significantly higher levels of automaticity for international riders, compared to national and regional riders. “The higher up in the level of performance you are, the more you can allow your body simply to react, without having to think about it.” Essentially, “The better you are, the more automated the skills.” says Dr Wolframm. Having automaticity over the physical side of riding may allow a rider to free up their thinking processes to focus energy on the important mental skills required in competition.

When it came to differences between the sexes, researchers found that women were more likely to engage in negative thinking than their male riding counterparts. According to the researchers, this is similar to findings in non-equestrian sports.

Additionally, focusing on internal vs. external events is of great importance to riders says Dr Wolframm: “We also know that elite riders stress the importance of mental skills and relevant attitude more than amateur riders. Amateur riders tend to focus very much on external events, while the elite rider says ‘No, no, you need to come back to yourself, to your own emotional strength’.

An encouraging finding was the significant relationship between the use of mental skills and years of participation i.e. the longer you participate, the better your skills can become. How riders can improve their psychological state was also touched upon by Dr Wolframm: “The more time you give yourself in the practice ring, the more time you give yourself as a rider, the greater the chance also your mental skills will improve, which will eventually also help you to improve your performance.”

- ENDS -

The International Society for Equitation Science (ISES) is a not-for-profit organisation that aims to facilitate research into the training of horses to enhance horse welfare and improve the horse-rider relationship. www.equitationsscience.com

For more information contact:

ISES President

presidents@equitationsscience.com

ISES Media Officer

media@equitationsscience.com