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Mental approach to life as an athlete

I know that there are similar rules out there. These simply are my guiding lines and they will probably always develop further. Inspired by my mentors, trainers, life-challenges and failures.

There is only YES – if you try hard enough. Never let anyone tell you what you are not capable of. No-one is allowed to dictate your dreams. Use discourage as fuel to light your motivation. Setting goals and chasing them is about so much more than the final result, time or placing. The journey is what creates the elite athlete; the final results are merely a symptom of what a rider has become by putting in work every day.

Love – and share joy. Being happy is such an important part of success- Success is not bringing happiness – but success will come, once you are content and happy.

Life is not fair!

Don't Complain. Recognize that complaining doesn't bring you closer to your goals. Getting bitter and dwelling on complaints and perceived unfairness only develops a negative and ineffective state of mind.

Look for Solutions, Not Excuses. While many athletes will talk about achy muscles, excessive homework, or how they don't feel up their best, your inspiring role model will find a way to be successful in spite of these same types of challenges.

Make the Best of what you have. Heaps of Olympians have come up through the ranks having trained in dark, dungy arenas. They know that all they need is a good surface, the horse and they are good to go. Conditions and your environment will never be perfectly ideal; the key is to maximize the resources you do have.

Try harder: Being Elite Isn't a Part Time Gig. You can't be good and expect to be great. Likewise, you can't be great once in a while, or part time. Elite athletes show up every day, not when they feel like it, or when circumstances suit them. Willing to Go the Extra Mile. This can mean that they will come in early, stay after practice for additional work, or step up and do a faster interval even when not prodded to do so. The adage "first one in, last one out" is highly applicable to elite athletes. Good is not good enough – there is always room for improvement.

Take pride in the fact that you work hard, that you are willing to do what others won't.

Never judge, but respect. Who am I to judge others??

Always encourage. Be kind and supportive. Whether it is cheering on teammates, helping out the youngsters, or being a friendly ear when someone is having a rough day, elite athletes have a strong sense of compassion for their teammates and for the sport in general.

Forgive. Not for the sake of the others – but for the sake of yourself! If you cannot forgive, it will have a negative effect on your own life.

Hush. If you cannot say anything positive -> rather say nothing at all!

Be grateful for everything! No matter how little.

Perfection does not exist. Set Higher Standards “Good enough” is not good enough. Don’t confuse this with perfection; elite athletes understand the difference between striving for excellence versus chasing perfection (it doesn’t exist!).

Be humble. Don’t take yourself too serious. It is not you – without everything around you it wouldn’t have happened. It’s not about you – but your approach, work and dedication.

Don’t talk -> show! Put words into action. You can say that you want to be a championship caliber athlete all you want, but are your actions reflecting this intent?

Never stop learning. Always take criticism thankfully – even if it hurts. Feedback from coaches isn’t taken personally or negatively. Listen to it and assess criticism as objectively as possible.

Everything happens for a reason! Setbacks, detours and roadblocks will happen, and the choice is whether they are going to be exercises in character development or the reasons for quitting

Unshakable Personal Integrity. How often do you commit to something and find that within a few days or weeks your resolve loosens, until the promise you made to yourself is broken and gone? Having personal integrity means that you not only keep your word and promises with others, but most importantly that you keep your word with yourself.

Take responsibility. Playing the blame game, or sugar-coating a bad ride with lame excuses is a disservice to yourself. Sure it may be an easy band-aid for your ego, but by explaining your performances away with excuses only means that you lose out on a valuable lesson and provides conditions for it to happen again down the road.

Plan - focus. Success isn’t an accident; it’s the result of planning combined with focused action. Elite riders know to get to where they want to go, they need to have a road map.

GO OUT THERE! Don’t wait for things to happen to you; go out and make it happen. Don’t hope for success to stumble upon you via luck or good fortune; actively chase it. Now - refuse to wait.

Surround yourself with Like Minded Athletes. How we perform is a result of the environment and the people we decide to surround ourselves with. Hanging out with naysayers and toxic people will rub off on us. Similarly, hanging out with athletes who are down to take things to the next level will only embolden and empower you.

“The best revenge is to be so awesome that your very existence grates on the nerves of those who try to hurt you, tear you down and make you disbelieve in yourself. Remember, they are telling their story..... Not yours. So don’t be sad! Be awesome instead!”

Mental approach towards your horse and training

Your horse comes first – AT ALL TIMES! No matter how tired you are – first take care of your horse with everything that's needed, till it is relaxed and happy in its box. Then – only then – you are allowed to get out of your sweaty clothes, take a drink, a shower or put up your legs.

Listen! Your horse is talking to you!

Take your time – your horse needs it!

Always defend your horse! There is a reason for everything – if you are not finding it, it doesn't mean that there is none.

Allow time for growing, developing and strengthening – both mentally and physically.

Look upon each failure as a ladder rung: step on it and lift yourself up. Failure is a constant on the road to success, so train yourself to use it in your favor. Failure provides us with critical information which we then use to improve our work. Embrace it. Welcome it. Study it and learn its lesson. Each time you fail, be thankful for the information, put it behind you, raise yourself up to the next ladder rung and try again. Failure is not the end, it is the beginning.

Leave your personal issues on the ground - approach each ride emotionally neutral. What is energetically in us goes into the horse. If you carry your emotional refuse into the ride, i.e.; bad day at work, family problems, etc., it will inevitably affect performance. Be very careful what you put in as horses are like computers, if you write bad code, you will have to rewrite it at some point. Learn to neutralize your emotions BEFORE you get on the horse. This will give both of you an opportunity to begin the ride clean. So – on some days: rather do NOT ride!

Be the calm baseline that your equine partner can rely upon at all times. The psychology of the horse requires a partner willing to assume a leadership position and to offer understanding. This translates to the horse via the language of the body in all circumstances, all scenarios. Horses are very different characters, but never try to be difficult on purpose to bother you – understand where they are coming from and don't treat them as a human being: they are not moody, grumpy, or have their "moments" -> there always is a reason for the behavior. A rider who remains mentally AND physically steady when the horse experiences confusion, fear and perhaps resulting chaos, will very quickly gain trust, confidence and devotion to the work from their equine partner -> they will work *with* and not *against*. Trust is earned not given; work to deserve it from the horse.

Own your personal space both on and off the horse. Maintaining ones space communicates leadership. A dominant stallion is up on his toes, tail flagged, every muscle pumped full announcing his arrival...his presence is known. His body language virtually screams 'follow me!' This type of presence must also subtly be in a rider's body language when working both on the horse and off. Our equine partners rely on us to lead them and we communicate our worthiness of this responsibility with our body language, with the feeling of resolve within our bodies. Effective riders maintain exemplary posture both on and off a horse, we carry ourselves, we own our space with a steely intention, communicating our empathetic power and ability to lead to those who rely on us: our equine partner.

Train your 'inner voice' to be either positive or constructively negative, never defeating. Always approach the ride with a sense of wonder: what will the ride bring? What is the legacy of yesterday's work? Will it be fair to push the horse just a bit more today? Problems, resistances that arise are addressed constructively, not reacted to emotionally. It is the supportive 'inner voice' of the rider that keeps the ride 'on the rails' and productive, ending always on a positive in preparation for continued success in the next ride. It is the burden of the rider to maintain an emotional 'thru-line' that directs the ride steadily toward completion.

Success happens one ride at a time, day in and day out, remaining consistent and realistic in their daily goals and expectations. The work is a continuum, each ride building upon the last. There are no short cuts. You can buy a fantastic horse, but not the feeling and ability to ride it - you have to make it with consistent, correct work, realizing nobody can do it for you. The amount of success you have as a rider is directly related to the amount of effort you put into it. Rome was not built in a day and neither is a Grand Prix rider/trainer, nor a Grand Prix horse. Get up, dress up, show up and put in another day's work. Then do it again, and again and...again. The river of trying never stops flowing.

Have the courage to be creative in your problem solving, the courage to go beyond the text-book and think independently. Innately understand that every horse is different. Every rider is different. Every moment is a new moment, a new opportunity to create quality. An effective rider has the courage to experiment and try something different in approaching the problem, all the while adhering to the core premise of the Training Scale, placing the mental and physical well-being of their equine partner first and foremost.

Be an athlete you expect your horse to be. Eat healthy, drink lots of water and strengthen physically and mentally. The foundation of the Training Scale is the rider's seat. Every rider strives to be in control and command of their physical being, able to independently apply the aids effectively in both calmness and chaos. It is imperative that we cross-train, building our own strength, endurance and dexterity away from the horse. Cross-training keeps the muscles 'fresh' i.e.; not locked into the sole muscle memory of the ride itself but rather neutral, able to break old 'muscle memory' response patterns easily if required. Poorly trained horses affect the muscle memory of the rider just as poor riding affects the muscle memory of the horse. Cross-training assists the rider in both developing athleticism and neutralizing undesirable muscle memory.

There is only one direction to go: forward! I have never ever had a horse that – once it was psychologically and physiologically in the position to work – did NOT love to move. Know how to use this base instinct in the horse as a key ingredient in the work each and every day. As it is in life: if all else fails, GO FORWARD! In this way, an effective rider creates a fresh moment, a fresh opportunity to try again toward understanding and success.

Work for your horse, not vice versa. Do what you do for the sake of the horse... and nothing else. 'Dressage' encompasses all that we do from the moment we rise in the morning and enter the stable aisle to the final night check at the end of the day. Know you must stay close to your horses each and every day in order to build the intimacy required for the Grand Prix. Know your partner's shades, characters, their idiosyncrasies, their likes and dislikes. The transition from the aisle to the school is best seamless: true partners from the stall to the aisle to the schooling arena to the show ring and home again.

Riding is an art form in motion, therefore it only survives as such when practiced correctly on a daily basis by both Master and student, through the grace of correctly trained horses. Strive to develop good habits, for the sake of the sport, for the sake of the horse and for your own future as an accomplished rider. Riding is not a form of martial arts – so always strive to achieve the lightest way of dancing communication.