



EXCELLENCE IN EQUINE NUTRITION

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Horse Sense, in association with

Building your confidence



BHSI Stage 5 performance coach **Brendán Bergin** outlines four tips for riders to boost their confidence when competing

THE Covid-19 pandemic has completely changed the landscape of equestrian sport.

For many competitors and coaches it has wiped out a significant portion of the competition season. However, we are now seeing some light at the end of the tunnel with competition resuming across the country. Most riders will probably be a bit ring rusty and need to develop their confidence to get out there and compete again. After a long sabbatical there are a number of aspects required to develop confidence; training to boost your competence, logical focused practice, finding your growth zone and making sure your “chatterbox” is helping rather than hindering your progress.

1. Boost your competence

As riders, we are responsible for understanding the process of developing skills in our equestrian sport. Competence is a four stage process which needs to be carefully managed and developed with a good coach. As we develop, it will lead to a deep well of confidence you can draw on when you need it. The four stages in the development are:

➤ **Unconscious incompetence:** At this stage we are blissfully ignorant with no understanding of how much we don't know and often cannot see the



importance of getting help. As challenges increase we move the next stage realising that help is needed.

➤ **Conscious incompetence:** At this stage we suddenly realise that we have deficiencies and need help to get past them. A competent coach is indispensable at this point helping to unfold the roadmap to the next stage. This stage can be the most paralysing and usually where confidence is at its most diminished state, usually we come to this stage after a “fall”.

➤ **Conscious competence:** When we get to this stage we start to really grow as a rider where skills start to come together although they are not yet fully reliable and require a lot of thought. Confidence is fragile but with careful help will grow and build to be drawn on later.

➤ **Unconscious competence:** This is what is referred to as “quiet confidence” when our skills and reflexes are so well balanced that we do things automatically without thinking about it.

As you work through the process developing competence at each phase you should have more confidence in reliable performance.

2. Practice makes permanent

Making good practice a priority is a cornerstone of developing confidence in the competition sphere. The difference between successful riders and riders paralysed by lack of confidence is their approach. Our approach to practice is important, it is worth taking a professional's mind set: “Don't practice until you get it right, practice until you can't get it wrong.” With this in mind you need to divide your training between skills development and emulating competition stress to build your self confidence for the day of the event. A good way of training for this is competition style course jumping or dressage tests. In competition training take care not to linger over the last fence, instead focus on the next. Of course repetition for improvement is critical for the development of rider and horse skills and reflexes.

3. Outside your comfort zone

In modern society, feeling uncomfortable is seen as an unacceptable outcome, we should never feel awkward or sore or any of those emotions that make us squirm. To grow and develop in any sport or discipline we need to move our limits one

small piece at a time. If you never move beyond the discomfort you never experience the taste of success after conquering your demons. Our comfort and confidence zones are in constant flux.

Riders and coaches have to share the responsibility to evaluate where the comfort zone ends and the fear zone begins. The growth zone is a narrow sliver in the overlap between fear and comfort. Although it might seem like stating the obvious when you start to move outside your comfort zone into the growth zone it is uncomfortable! The key is to work with your coach to find the ideal threshold point for you so that you can grow in confidence week on week.

Many riders find stepping up from EI90 to EI100 a daunting jump but if you take it step by step and install the necessary skills over time the progression while uncomfortable can be near seamless.

4. Having a good self-talk

Your interior monologue is one of the most difficult facets to train in the confidence puzzle. Your chatterbox has a way of steaming off like a runaway train, these thoughts can often be negative “that fence is very big” or “that line is very tight.” Negative self-fulfilling prophecies will nearly always lead to their fulfilment. The language we use and how we talk internally has a huge bearing on the outcome of our self confidence.

First off in training, I encourage all my clients to finish every session with a realistic positive world view by giving me a small star, a wish and a big star. A small star is a skill that has improved from the start of the session to the end of the session. A wish is a skill that you will improve over the next number of sessions. A big star is a skill that you have improved over a number of sessions the highlight of your session. So wishes become small stars and then big stars.

It can be helpful to write them down so you can look back and how far you have come, this can become your development plan over time. Small purposeful steps always lead you forward. When you get to your competition and you are feeling “the fear” you can draw on your stars and remember how many skills you have developed in training and think of how to apply them. When you feel nervous it is nearly always because you have put in the training and expect a good result.

Brendán says it is worth taking a professional's mind set when it comes to training for competition - “Don't practice until you get it right, practice until you can't get it wrong.”



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