



Sue Polley talked to Performance Psychologist **Charlie Unwin** to find out how understanding some basic principles can make a huge difference, regardless of your level of competition

Mind Games

FORMER GB MODERN pentathlete turned performance psychologist, Charlie Unwin works with a number of riders across various equestrian disciplines, including Britain's Young Rider squad, to help them optimise their performance, and has achieved some very positive results.

So, hands up how many of you have been in the situation where you're happily schooling at home, your horse is doing hoof-perfect impressions of La Biosthetique Sam FBW, you're relaxed and full of confidence and then you go to a competition and it all goes horribly wrong for no apparent reason? Yep, most of us have been there, done that, bought the T-shirt.

"Defining what performance psychology is can actually be a help in itself to understanding why this can happen and what we can do to try and minimise the chances of it happening in the future," explained Charlie. "It's all about successfully transferring what we do in training to the competitive arena, no matter how big that competition is and what the associated pressures are." These pressures could be anything from not wanting to let owners down, impressing existing or potential sponsors, needing to gain a qualification, dealing with crowds, press attention or simply not wanting to ride like an idiot in front of friends and family!

"I'm not a coach as such. My role is not to improve riders' technical skills or their capacity to ride better," Charlie went on. "My job is to help riders develop and believe in

their own system, allowing them to commit themselves wholly to the things they can control and not to worry or get distracted by the things they can't control. In a sport where the horse is easy to blame for erratic performance, riders like Michael Jung are demonstrating that there is plenty of opportunity to perform consistently at our best. But be under no illusion – this doesn't happen by accident."

So, here's the science bit: our competition brain is formed of two broad areas: the emotional brain and the logical brain. The logical brain is our 'guiding force' that allows us to solve problems, make decisions and concentrate seamlessly on routine movements – all things that are vital for performing at our best. The emotional brain, on the other hand, is our 'driving force', which we associate with nerves and rushes of adrenaline. It is designed to protect us from danger by diverting our attention towards threats in our environment, i.e. a difficult fence or other competitors. In training there

is rarely a problem as the emotional brain is relatively quiet, thus allowing our logical brain to perform without any interference. In competition, however, the far stronger emotional brain, steals blood from the logical brain disrupting normal thought patterns and making the whole experience feel very different indeed. This rushes our thoughts, limits our concentration and disrupts our timing and decision-making ability – all things that feel completely out of character. In the absence of having a system for staying relaxed and focused on performance, this can dramatically affect our scores.

To illustrate this Charlie cited the example of working with a rider prior to his first Badminton: "While mounted I got him to imagine that he was entering the dressage arena at Badminton and encouraged him to notice everything around him as if he was actually there on the day. As soon as he started doing this you could see tension creep slowly into his legs and shoulders,

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Charlie Unwin

Charlie graduated from Durham University where he read Psychology before joining the Army as an officer in 2001. After a year at Sandhurst, he was commissioned into the Royal Horse Artillery, with whom he served in Iraq as a platoon commander. There he was responsible for conducting counter-insurgency operations as well as training and recruiting the new Basra police force. Charlie was later seconded into the GB Performance Centre for Modern Pentathlon in Bath. Within just two years he was ranked top three in Great Britain and was selected for the GB team at the World Championships. In 2007 Charlie was National Champion. It was during his time as an athlete that Charlie's passion for applied psychology flourished, believing this to be a fundamental contributor towards his achievements rather than raw talent!

Charlie retired as an athlete in order to pursue this passion and gained a further MSc in Sport and Exercise Psychology. Since then he has worked as a performance psychologist with individuals and Olympic teams across several sports, including equestrian, fencing, pentathlon and the Winter Olympic Skeleton Team.

something that his horse responded to by shifting around on the spot. He then physically rode through his test, but with limited success, claiming that the horse wasn't listening properly. He wasn't happy that the visualisation had had this effect, but of course that was the point! By recognising how he reacted to just the thought of competing at Badminton, we were then able to work on techniques to help him relax and stay focused on performance. This was exactly what he was able to do on the day."

It could be argued that mental preparation is one of the reasons why the German team has performed so well at recent Championships: "They really put an emphasis on getting things right first time at home and in smaller competitions," said Charlie. "Therefore, there is not so much pressure to raise their standards at big competitions as all the hard work has already been done."

This, combined with confidence, the ability and willingness to focus on on-going progression and the bigger picture, rather than the immediate result, is what separates the world's top riders from the rest of us mere mortals. Enter Messrs Jung, Fox-Pitt and Nicholson. This is where psychology with professional riders starts to place as much importance on broader factors such as self-identity and strategic planning as it does on simply coping in the moment.

"It's all very well having a perfect plan but that's meaningless if you don't have confidence in how to deliver it and accept that there will be challenges to overcome on your journey to your ultimate goal," Charlie elaborated. "Mental preparation and self-belief play a large part in your ability to perform at your best as it means you will have thought in detail about what you want to do, what makes you tick and how best to manage your emotions in certain situations. At the end of the day, no-one is as good at being you as you, and if you don't know what makes you good then you cannot replicate it."

Charlie was also keen to stress the importance of asking yourself questions such as: what does being successful mean to me in the long term, not just the next competition? "All too often I see a rider's competitiveness get the better of them, leading to the desire to achieve too much too soon. In doing so they are easily frustrated and lose the ability to accurately measure their progression. Tiny improvements in different areas of performance are dismissed and dwarfed by the ever-persistent image of what we could or should be doing," he said. "Lots of riders I work with initially struggle to break down their goals into isolated areas. Without doing this it becomes very hard to gauge what needs to improve. Confidence comes from

doing the things that you can control such as flatwork in between fences or your next transition, so when riders tell me that they have lost their confidence, it's normally because they have lost trust in focusing on these things and nothing else." Importantly, this can be achieved regardless of how nervous you are. In other words, that sickening feeling we experience in the pit of our stomach needn't stop us committing to our next transition or pushing out of every cross country fence. This is why great riders like Matt Ryan and Pippa Funnell have always been able to perform despite their reported nerves.

Charlie relates this notion of focusing on the process and not the outcome by contemplating Younger Brother Syndrome: "A disproportionate number of World Champions in all sports are younger siblings," Charlie explained. "Always beaten by their older brothers and sisters at a young age, younger siblings are motivated not by winning, but instead by getting better – constantly striving to improve against their own measure of success, not against other people. They are therefore conditioned to focus naturally on the finer details of performance without the emotion of losing preventing them from learning."

This is a message Charlie works hard to reinforce when he is working with the Young Rider squad: "Success at an early age does not guarantee success later and I've worked

with several riders who really struggled when they left the support system and safety net provided in the Youth Eventing structure. When riders step out of this they have to make their own decisions and be confident in these decisions and not rely on other people always being there to support them financially, physically and mentally. Those who are more likely to be successful at Senior level are those who have developed a growth mindset, i.e. they see the bigger picture, can break down their goals into things they can control and always take the opportunity to learn something from their experiences. All experiences are meaningless unless they impact something you do in the future or influence you to do something different. You'll never see the likes of Michael Jung or Andrew Nicholson blaming their horses when something has gone wrong as they are not solely focused on the immediate result and they are open to learning and letting their horses do the same."

So, taking all of this on board, is utilising performance psychology alone going to turn us into the next Badminton winner? Well put it this way, you are unlikely to win it without a robust and consistent mental approach, no matter how talented your horse is. No one finds this easy, but what some people might define as 'problems' others may define as simply being part of the sport we love so much. 🐾

Charlie will be releasing *Competing at Your Best* in February 2014. For further information visit www.performancelegacy.com and follow Charlie on Twitter @CharlieUnwin

Charlie's top tips for improving performance

Preparing a horse for the season depends on the individual, as each horse and rider is different.

1. The most common mistake in competition is to think you have to produce something magical. Instead, **commit to doing all the simple things that you can control to the best of your ability** and allow the results to take care of themselves.
2. **Maintain a healthy balance between your strengths and weaknesses.** Elite performers have been found to think about their best performances more than less successful performers. This gives them the confidence and motivation to address their weaknesses without feeling bad about them.
3. **Breathe! Identify techniques and routines to help you stay relaxed at competitions.**
4. Examine your relationship with pressure – entering the Badminton show-jumping arena in first place is what every rider dreams about, so **there's no point fearing the experience.**
5. Remember why you took up the sport in the first place – it's fun!