

Getting Mentally Tough with Barbra Schulte

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“Barbra has done more for mental and emotional training than anyone I know.” —John Lyons

We’re zipping along a one-lane country road near Brenham, Texas headed for a non-pro cutting competition. The bluebonnets already blooming in this green horse country area of central Texas are a blue blurs whizzing past the window. You’ve got to move fast, like a good cutting horse, to keep up with Barbra Schulte. Speaker, clinician, author, teacher and professional coach, she’s the one who’s putting “mentally tough” into the vocabulary of professional and recreation riders alike.

“Mentally Tough Training teaches you to achieve and control your Ideal Performance State, whether you’re performing under pressure or for yourself on a trail ride. Competitor or not, we all have the desire to achieve our goals and reach the highest level we can. The reason we ride is for the connection with the horse and the pure pleasure of it. Our horses give us a way to stretch ourselves and to grown in areas that are challenging and interesting to us. The only difference between a competitor and a leisure rider is that competitors choose to test themselves in a pressure situation where the results are compared to other riders.”

Barbra should know about that. She made history as the first woman to win the National Cutting Horse Association (NCHA) Augusta Futurity, Derby and Superstakes Classic. The horses she has trained have won more than \$800,000 and earned major national level championships and regional titles. Her own title she won after discovering *Mental Toughness Training for Sports*, a book by Dr. James Loehr of LGE Sports Science, Inc., the progenitor of sports psychology for training Olympic athletes in many disciplines. Ready to branch out to the equestrian field, the company took her on in 1994 and trained her to become their only certified LGE Personal Performance Coach licensed to provide mental, physical and emotional training for the equestrian. She shares this expertise at clinics and horse expositions; she’s been the keynote speaker for the numerous conventions such as NARHA, APHA, U.S. Dressage Federation and Canadian Pro Rodeo Association. And she writes a column for the American Quarter Horse Journal.

So that’s why we were racing to a non-pro cutting competition where she would coach one of her students—a 64 year old lady who won “Rookie of the Year” under her tutelage.

“Coaching for confidence is important,” Barbra says, “because the emotion of confidence and calmness has a definite bio-chemistry in your body. With that emotion comes a rhythmic heartbeat, a muscle softness, and a soft feeling in your stomach so that just-right muscle tension and brain wave allows you to think clearly. Whereas negative emotions such as anger or frustrations also have a connection to a specific bio-chemistry—tight muscles, the feeling of being nauseous, accelerated heart rate—which all translates into tension in the legs and hands, loss of center of balance and jerky motions.”

“So for someone to ride at their highest level, instead of riding how we wake up in the morning—reactively—you can have the tools to take you to a state of confidence and mental readiness and toughness, so you can ride your best. This is what allows you to interact with your horse at your best—it’s the connection of mind, body and emotion.”

So what are those tools? We’re now sitting in the Nueces Canyon Ranch arena, and Barbra is carefully watching and picking the cows to cut while she explains.

“*Scripting* is one of the main mind skills you learn. This is basically how you talk to yourself. Most of us coach ourselves about what not to do. For instance, if your horse shies at water and you say to yourself, ‘I hope my horse doesn’t shy at the creek.’ it actually promotes a negative emotional response when you get near the water. Which leads to a negative physical response, which your horse senses, and guess what—he shies at the creek.”

“If you learn to talk to yourself in ways that keep you focused and positive, so that you are filling your head with good technical instruction as well as positive thoughts, it changes the way you feel and replaces fear with confidence.”

“A change of script to a positive statement reflects what you want to happen. For instance, you might say, ‘The creek will be a real challenge. I know that by asking for horse’s attention before we reach the creek, my horse

will do the right thing and I'll feel great." Or, as she tells herself when cutting, "Stay cool, Barb, keep your eye on the cow."

"By creating this different set in your mind, you give yourself a whole new emotional response to the situation. When you realize you have control over your response to the situation, it empowers you and you have fun." And fun is an important aspect of being with horses, Barbra fervently believes.

Visualization is the other mental skill you apply, coaching yourself by visualizing the successful execution of what you want to do. As you approach the creek, you visualize you and your horse crossing it confidently, calmly and safely. Visualization is about habits—used positively it creates good habits. Used negatively, visualization can start bad habits by sending the wrong instructions to the sub-conscious. "Create an image in your mind that is compelling and exciting," Barbra says. "Coach yourself to maintain a high, positive emotional state. Visualization should be fun," she adds. "it should take you to a place where you have a magic wand to create whatever you want."

Lastly, Mental Toughness involves *Acting*. If you something to happen, you act it. For instance, if you want to feel confident, you act confident. You sit up straight, spine straight but relaxed, chin up, breathing regular, eyes ahead. Your body tells your mind, "I'm confident" and vice versa. "What you do with your body will lead to the emotion," Barbra explains.

With that, she leaps onto a three-year old cutting horse in training and moves out to survey the cows. But not before turning and squeezing in one last piece of advice.

"Keep it fun," she says with a smile. "Isn't that why you got involved with horses in the first place? Keep asking yourself, 'What makes it good for me?' If you're in a situation that's not fun, no one else is responsible for changing that except yourself."

FOR MORE INFORMATION

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About the Author

Lin Sutherland teaches horsemanship and riding at Onion Creek Ranch in Austin, Texas. She rides and writes where the west wind takes her.