



# Mind over matter

Does the test go out of your head as you prepare to ride up the centre line?  
**JANE CARLEY** finds out how rider psychology training can help fulfil your goals

Even if dressage is an occasional hobby, riders should consider themselves as athletes, suggests Russell Guire of Centaur Biomechanics, which includes rider training in its portfolio.

“It’s easy to focus too much on the horse’s way of going, but the rider’s seat and position, fitness and state of mind can have a significant effect on test scores, so need to be considered as part of your training programme,” he explains.

Understanding rider psychology has become increasingly important for elite dressage riders, with professionals from other sports brought in to help our teams before major championships. But it can also be beneficial to leisure riders and those who make their living from training or selling horses.

Russell emphasises that it is important to recognise the impact of the negative feelings that crop up when preparing for and riding a test.

“A rider who is nervous will drop their eyes and head as they come up the centre line. This in turn rounds the shoulders – the ‘ejector

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Russell Guire,  
 Centaur Biomechanics

position’, which can affect the horse’s balance. If you ride up the centre line with your head and eyes up, not only does it give the judge the impression of a more confident, accomplished rider, but the horse will go better, too.”

## GOING BLANK

Many riders worry about forgetting their test and that can add to the nerves, but Russell suggests that preparation is key.

“You obviously don’t want to ride through the test on your horse repeatedly, but walking through it, drawing it out on a piece of paper or using an app to help learn it means that you are fully prepared and thus more confident about remembering the test.”

When running through the test, riders can also use imagery to rehearse various scenarios that might happen – such as the horse drifting on the centre line – and work on exercises to tackle any problem areas. >>





“You do need to be capable of carrying on if you go wrong, or if your horse is naughty, so when practising at home, don’t stop and restart the test. If you have a problem, pick up from there and finish the test as you would need to in a competition.”

Changing riders’ attitudes to the test can also help them cope with any unforeseen issues.

“Goal setting can help with this,” Russell comments. “Your final goal might be the regionals, or a championship, so getting a low mark for one movement or riding one bad test is not a disaster; it is merely a stepping stone to bigger things, and an opportunity to use the test to school your horse and improve future performances.”

“Dressage can be a negative sport, as you are being judged each time you go down the centre line, so it’s important to remember that it is meant to be fun, and that each outing is simply a building block to your eventual goal.”

### CONTROLLING THE CHIMP

Kate Goodger is a psychological skills mentor who has worked with a wide range of Olympic sports. On the back of success with Team GB canoeing, she joined the BEF a year ago to work with World Class Development riders. Kate works for Chimp Management, a consultancy developed by Professor Steve Peters, who has been considered instrumental in the successes of British cycling and Team Sky. Chimp Management uses an innovative approach, to work with athletes mentally, called the Chimp Model.

“The Chimp Model is based on neuroscience rather than psychology, and helps athletes to understand the processes in their brain and develop skills to manage them,” explains Kate.

“If you have insight into what is happening in the brain, there is a greater chance of developing skills to manage it, and to get the best out of yourself on the day of competition.”

The Chimp Model works on the principle that there are three teams in the brain – the Chimp, the Human and the Computer.

The Chimp is the emotional centre of the brain, concerned with survival, but also the irrational part of the brain. It works on the basis of feelings and impressions, and is driven by basic instincts and drives, such as ego, food and territory.

### CASE STUDY: OLIVIA OAKELEY



**Twenty-year-old Olivia Oakeley from Gloucestershire (pictured riding Donna Summer) is a member of the World Class Development Squad and was a team member at the Young Rider Europeans in 2012 and 2013. Through World Class training, Olivia works with Kate Goodger.**

“Learning to manage my chimp has had a significant effect on my everyday training and preparing for major competitions,” she comments. “It also helps in my everyday life.”

While Olivia says that she doesn’t get particularly nervous before competitions, she believes that the technique has improved her mental preparation. “Kate has taught me to look at all the eventualities and to overcome irrational thoughts. In a team event, I tended to think that if I didn’t perform well, I would let everyone down. Now I work out everything that could make me nervous and work through a rational thought process, which includes the fact that I can only do my best on the day.”

How a horse will behave at a big event is a common concern, but Olivia says: “I remind myself that I am working with an animal and I can’t change his mood – I have to work with what I have got.”

She adds that using the Chimp Model is an everyday process that can be relied upon increasingly in the run-up to a major competition. “I find it fascinating as well as beneficial and I like the fact that we don’t just sit down and have a chat with the psychologist, we have to help ourselves.”

“The Chimp can be our best friend by helping us to pursue our dreams and ambitions, but can also be our worst enemy in hijacking us with emotional thinking. Examples in everyday life include where we lose perspective, have to have the last word in an argument, worry what others think, or ‘beat ourselves up’ if something does not go well.

“On the day of a test, if the Chimp takes over, a rider may go through their test in a flight/fight/freeze mode, which is a highly unstable state, and lowers the probability of being consistently successful,” says Kate.

The Human is the logical part of the brain, and works with facts and truth. It helps us to prepare the horse, programme our brain to undertake the test and run through a debrief of the test to know what to do next time. However, it is a much slower processing part of the brain and can lead to over-thinking if the rider is trying too hard. >>



LEARNING YOUR TEST: BD FORUM MEMBERS SHARE THEIR TIPS

**Donna Cartmell from Fylde, Lancashire, competes her five-year-old Samarant mare, Samia, at prelim level and rode at medium level on her previous horse, Just Willoughby.**

She says: "I draw the pattern and learn it. I always learn the letters. Then I make sure I can go through the test backwards from finish to start, then I do a dip check, for example, I select a movement in the middle of the test and make sure I can remember the two movements that follow.

"The last bit is vital for me because if I lose track during the test (either because something has gone stunningly well or stunningly badly) it only takes a moment to remember where I'm going next, rather than having to run the whole test through my head again.

"I used to memorise the pattern only, but I had a tendency to memorise it in accordance with the orientation of the arena and one day the arena ends had been swapped and it totally floored me!"

**Irishconnie**

"I do a combination of methods. First learn pattern by tracing with my finger on test sheet as I read, then memorise letters and

test as written on sheet, then ride it, practise movements, watch YouTube and march round the kitchen doing the pattern and saying (eg medium trot). I even get my long-suffering husband to 'test' that I can recite the movements as on the sheet. I know the test inside out, but despite this my mind can still go blank in the competition!"

**Silverstone**

"I learn the sheet word for word. Walk through while I'm warming up in the evenings as our school gets quite busy, and then run through it once or twice with my trainer. I practise sections of a test so that [my horse] Silver can't beat me to the next bit!"

**Jobo**

"I have the diagrams and find it very easy to learn from them. I then have a chant in my head and visualise the arena. Then you never let in an inkling of doubt, as that's when you go wrong. I always have to check before I go in where the halts are as that's one problem of learning the pattern."

“Critical to being successful is understanding that there are different parts of your brain that act in any situation”

Kate Goodger, psychological skills mentor

The Computer is where knowledge is stored; in the case of the rider, the test itself and information gained from training on how to ride the movements, and so on. Training and repeated practise enable us to programme our computers for the test. Also, our experiences in life are stored in the computer – such as making a cup of tea or driving a car.

"The Computer runs the show and responds automatically to what it knows," says Kate. "It is effectively an empty box that is programmed by life. This would include your pre-performance routine – preparing the horse and visualising your test."

"The Computer can also contain unhelpful beliefs. If you harbour unhelpful beliefs, such as 'X's horse is better than mine', or 'I must get a qualifying score', this can actually 'poke the Chimp'," says Kate. "Our aim is to teach riders how to programme their Computer so that it can get ahead of the Chimp and work on ways to manage them in the test environment.

An example of this is coping with an injury. The Chimp will say: "I can't believe this has happened to me. This is so unfair. I will never make it back from this."

The Human must respond: "Life isn't fair. We will focus on rehabilitation from the injury."

Kate explains: "The Chimp and the Human 'think', whereas the Computer doesn't. But the other parts of the brain check on the Computer before acting."

**TRAINING THE MIND**

According to Kate, if your response to riding a new test is: "I can't remember the test, it's too complicated," this may be the Chimp creating anxiety. But it can also be the Human over-thinking. The key is to identify which part of the brain is operating and to develop an autopilot in the Computer that you can refer to in future situations.

There are lots of ways to programme the Computer, and each rider must work this out individually. For example,

the Computer can utilise 'cue words' that help memorise part of the test, along with visualisation and walking through the test. At the competition, the Computer can also draw on a planned routine, from how you warm up right up to walking around the edge of the arena before the bell goes.

"Go through 'what if' scenarios in your mind and have a plan," says Kate. "For example, if you go down the centre line and forget the test, you need to be able to ask yourself 'what is the first movement, and where do I turn?', which will get you back on track."

"Coaches can also be involved in the process by recognising how the rider is functioning and helping to settle the Chimp," Kate explains. "Critical to being successful with this model is understanding that there are different parts of your brain that act in any situation. The skill of the rider is to know which part they want to use, and to develop the skill to put that part of the brain into action. The Chimp can often be seen as bad, but it is simply part of the brain that serves a critical function to our survival. However, allowing the Chimp to sit in the front of a saddle during a dressage test can make for interesting times!"

**FIND OUT MORE**

- Centaur Biomechanics is running an 'Improve your Riding and Confidence Conference' at Moulton College, Northants NN3 7QL on Saturday 7 to Sunday 8 June.

Two days of interactive talks and demonstrations specifically designed to improve your riding and confidence.

For more information visit [www.centaurbiomechanics.co.uk](http://www.centaurbiomechanics.co.uk)

- The British Psychological Society has worked with dressage riders to help with learning and riding tests.

A video can be viewed at:

[www.bps.org.uk/videos/sports-psychology-equestrian-dressage](http://www.bps.org.uk/videos/sports-psychology-equestrian-dressage)

