

Factors of performance : the overlooked aspects

Performance factors are essential in top level sport, but they are not very well known in equestrian sports. However it rapidly becomes apparent that physical, technical, tactical, mental, social factors and « luck » are all a part of the mix contributing to success. From some examples taken from the discipline of eventing, this fact sheet is an aid to a personal reflexion on making sure all the conditions are present in the planning and preparation of the season to come.

After the first part which analysed physical factors, and a second geared towards technical factors, this fact sheet will deal with tactical, mental and social factors as well as the contingencies of the competition which the « competition rider » generally overlooks in his analysis.

by **Guy BESSAT - Patrick GALLOUX - Philippe MULL** | 11.01.2018 |

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Technical level 



Two cadre noir horsemen, part of the French eventing team, at Granville during team preparation © IFCE

Introduction



Matthieu Van Landeghem riding Trouble Fête © P. Chevalier

The factors mentioned above are not always at the forefront of the athlete's thoughts, and yet these elements can sometimes negatively influence performance, and should be taken into consideration. They are often excluded from the preparatory work, and therefore not anticipated, but they are the glitch in the workings which can make things go wrong.

The technico-tactical factor

Strategy

Strategy is the team selector's concern for the preparation of major international events, but remain the rider's concern for all the individual preparatory events, or for national championships.

For cross-country, choices can be made by considering what time penalties are acceptable for example. Incurring time faults should not however jeopardise the expected performance or the aim (podium or final rank in the event), with regard to the provisional rank, and the performance of the other competitors :

- Regarding the speed over cross-country : it depends on the horse's physical preparation, and is linked to the horse's anaerobic threshold speed¹
- Regarding taking the direct route or an alternative route² depending on the technical level of the horse (and rider), the time faults incurred, or the results of previous riders on the fence.
- Regarding the going or the topography of the course : hard or uneven going, or excessive ground undulation could lead to adapting one's ambitions.
- Regarding where and when the event is situated with regard to the horse's preparation : some competitions may be run as a gallop during development or pre-competition phases.

In a team competition, the trainer can decide whether to let the last team members aim to improve the overall team performance, or if on the other hand it has become an unachievable goal. He can also choose to have the first team

member ride to secure a clear round, or on the contrary have him test the difficulties on the course for which he has little information. The order in which team members go across country is an important part of his strategy.



1 : Speed at anaerobic threshold is close to the speed that the horse can maintain on cross-country without overtiring. It is considered as maximum intensity to ensure a certain « lactate balance » throughout the duration of cross-country found in eventing competitions. (See the fact sheet : Assessing a horse's fitness level)

2 : An alternative route, compared to the direct route, is easier, and therefore is more time consuming (15 to 20 seconds). It will penalise a rider who cannot clear a major difficulty on the course, but without eliminating him. It will go against making optimum time, and in a championship a good rank.

Knowing the rules and regulations

Out of habit, a competitor forgets to «thoroughly dissect » the documents from national and international sports organisations. A rider also needs to integrate judges' and course designers' directives so as to have a idea of the judges' philosophy, or of the course builder's point of view. All good judges, fence judges or stewards revise the rules book before a competition so as to be ready to take snap decisions ; Should not the rider do the same ?

Mental factor

In any sport, one should be entirely objective in analysing one's « mental state » and relating it to one's performance (or lack of performance)

Self- confidence

This is essential. When competing, the rider (and his coach) should not be prone to doubts. This self- confidence starts with a sound analysis of the horse and rider's capacities ; varied³ work at home should enable to confront all sorts of difficulty⁴ with serenity. Self-confidence comes with the mastery of competences and skills. Since it is unimaginable to have a horse and rider jump certain fences



Mastering emotions © P. Mull

found at Badminton or Burghley, similar representative tests need to be found, and repeated.

Even if a horse and rider combination can surpass themselves during a competition, they still need a good success ratio on a type of combination, or on a technical difficulty in dressage when training, to have any hope of serenely replicating the performance in a competition.

Desire

Performance has no place when work is an obligation, desire is an essential parameter of performance. It is sometimes better to stop doing this sport, which requires a strong commitment, before having to move down a level and no longer feel the « buzz ». This desire, which can be likened to motivation, is linked to the ability to feel pleasure, because the preparation phase of both horse and rider demands a lot of effort and self-sacrifice. It is also a sport where a serious accident is always possible, there is an obvious risk factor. During one's sports career, the « element of madness » should be present. However, taking risks is not restricted to physical demands, it is also mentally demanding particularly when certain fences or certain dressage figures require a higher level of commitment and activity than the comfortable level of the clear round requires.

Ability to surpass oneself

The ability to surpass oneself, to accept a degree of suffering, to be aggressive and determined to win, is a personal ability ; it sometimes comes to light in good conditions of team work and spirit. Everyone has in mind a week of collective preparation which enhances the powerful surge of a group towards a common goal. For the horse there is also an ability to surpass itself, and beat a competitor ; a lot of jockeys have felt their horse contributing to victory in a race by not wanting to be beaten and overtaken by an adversary. For a horse, we cannot say that it accepts to suffer, as in any case, a horse should not suffer through man's ambitions, but some horses seem to be tougher, and braver, and show more trust in their rider over a course which is unknown to them. This is when we talk about a horse and rider partnership, especially on cross-country, a partnership which is as much a relationship as it is technical.



3 : The rider should work on all the technical difficulties not only those he prefers, or those his horse masters, or those which are in the training arena from the last training session.

4 : See fact sheet « Performance factors, part 2 : the technical aspect »

Mastering one's emotions and the ability to concentrate

These qualities are inherent to each individual , but they can also be worked on to improve them. Using the services of a sophrologist, or even a sports psychologist for specific problems, has become a common occurrence in team support. When final goals are repeatedly not met, or on the contrary when competitions where the stakes are unimportant cause problems, it could be the right time to question one's ability to concentrate and to master one's emotions. Breathing exercises, dynamic relaxation, mental image training, positive visualisation are all techniques which can be used in sports....

The horse is also concerned by mastering emotions, and ability to concentrate ; it is up to the rider to put the horse into a « bubble » of well-being, where the competition is no longer a war to be won but a means to express the qualities, enhanced by training, of a racing animal.

The social aspect

The relationship between trainer and trainee

Each trainer should think about his relationship to his trainees, especially with regard to any transference which could be made, especially when the trainer himself rode, or had the ambition to ride at a high level. Ralph HIPPOLYTE⁵ from the IFCE underlines the difference between each individual, and the most efficient way to ride with regard to ones's physical and behavioural profile. The trainer should not try to have the athlete ride as he would have ridden, and should on the contrary try to find the perfect physical and mental match for the profile of the horse and rider combinations he is working with.

The topic becomes even more sensitive when a national trainer becomes the substitute for the usual coach, for a period, especially for youngsters.and even more so when the usual coach is a parent.

For his part, the rider should also question his relationship to his/her coach : did he/she choose the trainer for a genuine contribution, or does he/she choose the

trainer because there are no contradictions ? Is the environment really well managed ? To what degree is the trainer present, responsible ? What are the rider's needs, including the need for autonomy ? Finally, horse-riding can very quickly become an individual sport, particularly when the rider has his horses at home, and moves away from his initial riding school.

Professional, family and affective life situations

As mentioned above, a complicated situation can lead to bad performance for some sportsmen or women. However, there are counter-examples, and it is far from certain that physical and mental comfort always contributes to top level performance. The saying « No performance without a degree of stress or pressure » takes on its real meaning. The important thing is to analyse one's own personal reactions to an uncomfortable or stressful situation, and decide whether the situation needs improving or preparing in advance.

In our opinion, meticulous organisation and preparation contribute to diminishing the consequences of any glitches in one's life, or in the sport.

Conversely, it may be necessary to eliminate elements which add to our emotional load, such as the presence of anxious parents or owners, or a trainer who proves incapable of taking into account the rider's needs...

Lifestyle

In its first definition, one's lifestyle aims to preserve and favour a sportsman's good physical and mental health. It is intricately linked to the way we live. Several factors to preserve one's health are to be noted : oxygenation, hydration, nutrition, physical activity.

Oxygenation

Can be largely influenced by a lack of core training for stamina, but also by smoking or by the use of drugs, which are forbidden and considered as doping.

Hydration

A frequently forgotten factor for riders (who do not have water bottle holders...) and whose activities in the stables are often dusty, making the installation of a water fountain inappropriate. Water is the only vital drink. Alcoholic drinks in excess should be banned whether when consumed regularly, or during an occasional binge.

Nutrition

A balanced diet should be implemented, and the athlete should neither overeat, nor miss meals as is often the case when riders are taken up with their professional and teaching activities outside the competition environment.

Physical activity

This is the final element. It is generally not a problem for the rider whose lifestyle meets the necessary daily physical demands through his/her activities. It becomes a problem when the total amount of daily work (equestrian activities and other professional activities, including driving) become overtiring and jeopardise performance potential. In these cases, adapting one's physical preparation becomes vital (see the fact sheet : Rider fitness- How to go about it)

Other elements to consider

- Protecting the rider's back, especially for the professionals who include manual tasks in their daily work, often in adverse ergonomic conditions.
- Respecting alternating periods of work and rest, vital for progression, and for getting the benefit from the work done during training.
- Sleep can be disturbed by being overtired, getting home late from competitions, using electronic devices such as tablets, long evenings in front of the TV....
- Accidents are not such a rare occurrence, especially in eventing and a rider's career may be marked by falls and fractures. As the rider gets older, healing takes longer and old injuries resurface, especially when the medical protocol is not respected, or is inexistant.
- Health, and particularly eyesight, which although precious, lessens with age, making it less precise in certain light conditions (indoor competitions) or more sensitive to dazzling light when facing the sun at the end of the day. Oral hygiene is often forgotten although it is linked to multiple tendon afflictions in sportsmen and women.

The horse's well-being

The horse also has a right to a lifestyle that takes into consideration his well-being. The onus is on us to respect his primary needs, which are generally met for a sport horse (hunger, thirst, shelter and comfort, free from injury or illness), and his psychological needs which are not always optimum, especially for stabled horses, by giving them the chance to act like a normal horse, and by restricting unnecessary sources of fear or anxiety...

The horse has social needs, he must be able to see other horses, touch them freely (using the senses of sight, hearing and smell). He should have some time turned out in a field or paddock, with nothing to restrict his movement (be able to trot, gallop...)and without working. Finally, he should be able to avoid other horses and stay in a quiet spot if kept out with others.



5 : Visiting lecturer at the IFCE for the cadre noir horsemen and the young riders in the « pôle France », for the concept of « action patterns ».

The « Luck » factor, or the contingencies of competitions

We will talk more about the contingencies of the competition, as on second thoughts, very little is left to chance, and cannot be foreseen . These « uncertain » conditions should therefore be anticipated, and be part of our reflection process.

Eventing is an outdoor sport which is judged, and a lot of elements enter the equation : Weather conditions with heavy rain or drought and the impact on the ground and the going ; the level of the other competitors, which can make the show-jumping test more or less difficult, or marginally correct the cross country course ; the running order, or the order in the team which remains the trainer's decision ; differences in the judges appreciation, or even the judges chosen for a given event ; misjudging a cross country fence ; injury or withdrawal of a team member or of other competitors... All these elements can either offer an opportunity, or increase pressure.

Once again, it is right from the start that preparation and analysis of all the options, whether in failure (after an incident the course), or in an opportunity when the instruction is to go the direct route. This process (systematic in the aeronautical sector, « where landing is just one of the options ») should be implemented. Analysing all the possibilities from a pre-established list of contingencies, is a genuine way to improve, or at least to not trivialise competition routine. Overlooking them or considering them as unlikely is taking a risk which should have no place in a competition.

Conclusion

Reading this article as a chore, may make the analysis seem unpleasant or uninteresting. It should however be a privileged moment in which to recollect the good and not so good moments of the last season. This analysis when detailed point by point, and when visualising each situation is a good way of making progress. In order to win and shine, the first thing to do is to establish an objective assessment of the horse and rider 's level. Then, to fix a realistic goal for the following season, an in depth analysis of the demands for each performance factor, especially the technical factor, should be carried out so as to maximise one's chances, and make sure everything is ready on the big day.

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