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RIDE

BLOG



The Ultimate Guide to Building Equestrian Confidence

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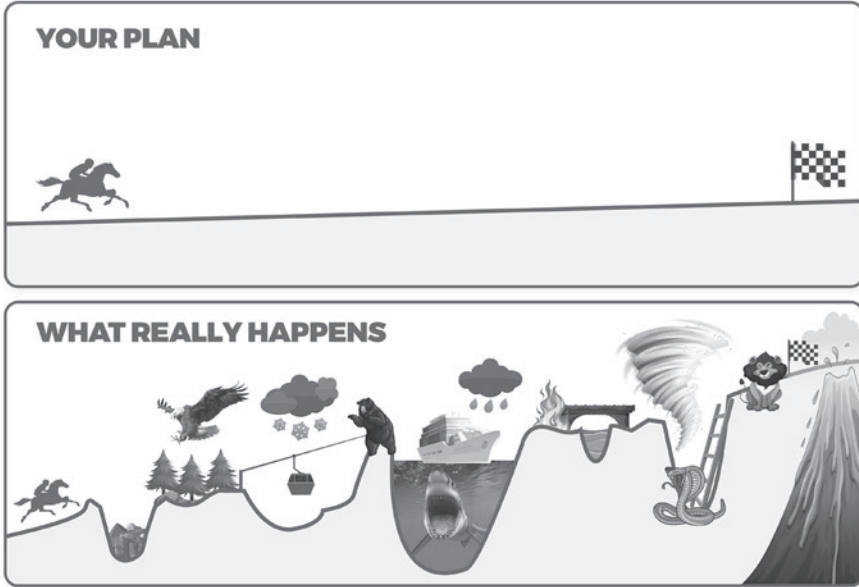
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THE PATH TO YOUR VISION



6.1

Remember that building your plan is an exercise in self-awareness. Do you know your abilities well enough to accurately benchmark yourself and then create incremental next steps for yourself? Do you know what you need to work on technically, physically, strategically, mentally, and emotionally to advance your capabilities in these areas? Most likely, each of these areas will need to be developed for you to achieve your vision. These areas should all be assessed carefully to understand strengths and deficiencies, and which require development to reach your targets. *Accurate assessment* is an essential tool and a good first step in your short-term planning.

Feedback is also a great opportunity to learn more and find out about capabilities. Speaking with coaches, trusted advisors, and others close to you can help you both set your targets and what developmental steps might be required to move toward the targets.

Your plan will include three key segments: the *targets*, the *steps*, and the *actions*.

Your Targets

Your first task is to determine what you want to accomplish over the next chosen period (six to twelve months).

What are your targets?

Will they be specific outcomes that are achievable at a set point in time, assuming some targeted development through the year?

Will they be development/improvement target areas where you would like to train and build some specific skills that will draw you closer to the vision?

In chapter 7 (p. 114), I will talk about stretching your comfort area. Setting your targets will give you an opportunity to do that, as will the steps and actions that will bring the target to life. Your targets must be carefully crafted with an element of reality and element of challenge.

To give you an idea of what a target might look like, here are a variety of general examples. The target answers the questions, “Where do I want to go?” or, “What do I want to achieve?” I’ve started each one below with “I want” as a suggestion for you.

- *I want to build a specific technical skill to enhance my riding capability.*
- *I want to build a specific physical skill to enhance my riding capability.*
- *I want to build a specific strategic skill to enhance my riding capability.*
- *I want to build a specific mental and emotional skill to enhance my riding capability.*
- *I want to improve my horsemanship.*
- *I want to learn to embrace mistakes and learn from each one.*
- *I want to become a more confident equestrian athlete.*
- *I want to make a local, regional, national, international team.*
- *I want to establish a quality relationship with one key equine partner.*

- *I want to win a class or achieve (enter your personal achievement here) this year.*
- *I want to learn how to better enjoy my equestrian experience.*

The language around your targets is important. Using words like, “I have to” creates an expectation and a level of urgency that isn’t healthy in going after targets. I’ve talked in these pages about expectations and their tendency to be emotional traps. “I want to” is healthier—it starts with an affirmative statement and clearly states what you would like to do.

I encourage developmental targets for equestrians. If you build pieces that will develop you as a rider (for example, your skillset, horsemanship, and confidence), chances are this development will help you get the results you are looking for. As your abilities develop, positive outcomes will be the result. Having a target like making a team or winning a class or match is motivating, but only when it is prefaced by “I want to...” and avoiding “I have to....”

As your abilities develop, positive outcomes will be the result.

So, begin assessing yourself, get feedback, and develop your targets based on what you want in a particular period of time, making sure they are in alignment with your vision. Setting targets is the first step, but there is really no point to any target unless you put the steps in place as to how you are going to reach it. I see many equestrians set goals that are often very loose, not well-defined, or just “lying on the page” with no action built in to make them happen.

Your Steps and Actions

After establishing your targets, your steps and actions are how you bring the targets to life and hold yourself accountable to them.

Let’s revisit the target list on p. 110. If “I want to become a more confident equestrian athlete” is a target for you, you must initiate a number of steps to build the confidence, understanding, and whatever other skills it will specifically take for you to develop it.

For example, from our work in chapter 4 (p. 61), you now know that your own narrative is key in order to build lasting confidence. So, a good first *step* is to work on your voice, being aware of your narrative, and remember to go through your steps I developed for you in that chapter to learn to establish the truth. Your ongoing *action* is the awareness to push back on the voice if it is creating unnecessary doubt and being judgmental.

If you have an outcome target like making a local, regional, national, or international team, there may be a variety of developmental steps and actions needed to reach that target. It could be a combination of technical and physical skills along with developing some mental or emotional pieces needed to perform in the team environment. So, based on assessment and feedback, specific *steps* and *actions* are put in place to ensure you develop the abilities to ride at these levels.

As a part of your steps and actions, structural pieces like your *equestrian values* and *equestrian purpose* should always be a part of your plan.

An example of a *step* in this case is your developed value system, which would become a fundamental piece of the plan to reach your targets, and your *action* would be ensuring that what you believe in is a part of your day-to-day decision-making and behaviors. You might also create actions such as reading your values once a week or posting them at the barn to keep them in sight and at the front of your mind.

Once you develop your targets and what you want to achieve in a particular time frame, a series of steps and supporting actions is the insurance that you will hit your targets and continually move closer to your vision.

You really, legitimately, *can't expect consistent progress in your equestrian experience without an equestrian plan for yourself*. You may have plans for your horse, but as a critical member of the partnership, you need plans to develop your skills, too. Many equestrians struggle with consistent progress forward because there just isn't the planning structure in place—including an inspiring vision and short-term

steps—to incrementally move toward it. Thinking carefully about your equestrian vision, and then supporting it with shorter-term targets and steps and actions, helps you “know” you are going in a direction that builds confidence. Not having a vision and plan just throws everything up in the air, including the significant time and financial investment you have made in equestrian sport.

Let’s move forward to another opportunity for you to build your confidence: understanding the idea of a *comfort zone*—what it is and how to develop it. You’ll hear from one of the world’s leading equestrian athletes about how he has progressed to the top of the sport, and you’ll use what he’s learned in his experiences to help you.

CHAPTER 9

What Are You Afraid Of?

Learning to Fall and Get Back Up

“The one who falls and gets up is stronger than the one who never tried. Do not fear failure but rather fear not trying.”

—Roy T. Bennett
In the Light of the Heart

Harry Meade is a world-class equestrian athlete.

But as you know, things go wrong in equestrian sport, even for top three-day eventers like Harry, who won team silver for Great Britain at the 2014 Alltech FEI World Equestrian Games in Normandy, France. It was an amazing comeback for a rider who just a year earlier suffered what looked like a career-ending fall.

What better way to start a chapter on equestrian fear than with a story of an eventer who crashed and burned on the cross-country course, spent months in the hospital rehabilitating his injuries and reflecting on the fall, and worst of all, was told by doctors that he was in such bad shape that he would probably never ride again?

In 2013, during a routine three-day event in Hampshire, England, Harry was competing at Advanced level on a horse that had never had a cross-country fault. However, jumping a relatively straightforward fence at speed under a low canopy, the horse backed off, chipped in, and hit the fence at chest height, and the pair somersaulted in a high-speed

rotational fall. Harry found himself power-driven straight into the ground like a javelin. Due to the vertical nature of the fall, he couldn't roll, so he put his arms out to break the fall. Both elbows locked straight and snapped backward, and his horse landed flat on him.

"The fall itself was reminiscent of us both jumping off a diving board headfirst into an empty pool," Harry recalls. "My arms bent the wrong way at the elbow. I remember the feeling that they exploded before my body even hit the ground. I'm sure if I hadn't used my arms, I would have broken my neck."

Both of Harry's elbows had shattered into dozens of pieces.

"The pain was excruciating," he remembers, "and I never went into any kind of shock, so there was no escaping it. I was taken straight into the operating room, and they removed the pieces of broken bones, leaving me hanging for several days with each boneless arm suspended from hooks on the ceiling, as they set about reconstructing the jigsaw puzzle of bone fragments in the next-door room."

Harry remained in traction for three months with doctors telling him it was highly unlikely he'd ever ride again.

So, where does an athlete whose entire identity is attached to his experience in equestrian sport go when told he may never do the thing he loves most again? And how easy is it to get back on the horse and feel confident again, considering the unpredictability and uncertainty of cross-country and the emotional trauma of a potentially career-ending injury?

It's not easy at all. Everyone feels fear, even a rider like Harry, regarded as one of the best cross-country riders in the world. He considered the complete identity loss and had to deal with the fear of losing his riding career—the only thing he'd really known since he was a little boy.

"Initially, it was the loss of the dream and thing I loved most in life, but later my main concern was that I had no form of income," says Harry. "Eventing was my livelihood, and I had a child and a pregnant wife to support. It was a crossroads in my life. On both fronts, I wasn't

going to give up lightly. I needed to be absolutely sure riding was an impossibility if I was going to stop. I wouldn't walk away and wonder after if I maybe could have come back.

"So, I created a plan to try and see if my arms would stand up to riding."

The Road Back for Harry...in His Own Words

"It all started with my arms still in traction," Harry says. "I asked to be hauled onto a horse. I had virtually no movement in the elbows, but I could shut my fists to grip the reins. On that first day I had a walk

"I had no fear,
no hesitation,
just a joyful
sense of
belonging."

and a trot. The next day, I rode up onto the gallops, bridged my reins, and got into a steady canter, and then allowed the horse to gallop. I realized that I could steer and stop and that the arms had very little to do with this—it was about the hands, upper body, and core strength.

"Then and there I decided, despite having minimal use of my arms off a horse, that there was a chance we could still get to Badminton. I thought I would have just enough time to get the horse to peak fitness to compete at Badminton, if there were no setbacks.

"I was as weak as a kitten and didn't want to overdo the pressure on the arms, so I started riding one horse a day for a short time and built up from there.

"During my stint in hospital, I'd had plenty of time to reflect and had been very open with myself. I was well aware that my confidence may have taken a battering, but I wouldn't know until I tried. That openness and honesty with myself, and the pre-empting of any possible confidence wobble, was my starting point.

"I decided that if I did get back on, I would do it with certain measures in place. I planned more cross-country schooling sessions than normal, and even an unaffiliated event, which I had never done, prior to

my first event back. This would allow me the opportunity to compete without pressure or worrying about results. I was also prepared to talk to a sports psychologist. And I'd start my horses a level below where they'd normally compete. My guess was that being open to help is more likely to eliminate potential fears than an approach that is based simply on determination and denial.

"The first cross-country schooling session was at a place I know very well. I took my five best horses and started with my easiest horse.

"After jumping the first few fences, I got this feeling and laughed out loud and thought to myself how foolish I'd been: This is what I do, it's who I am, I'm totally at home galloping down to a fence, and it's just totally natural for me. This is where I belong. I just felt like I was in the flow. I had missed it so much—riding with complete liberty and freedom. It was just so great to be out and have the opportunity to do it when I thought I might never again. I felt absolute passion and purpose. It was a brilliant feeling.

"I realized that all the extra measures I'd put in place may be overkill and entirely unnecessary. I had no fear, no hesitation, just a joyful sense of belonging. Even so, I felt a belt-and-braces approach was still worth taking, so I went through the motions of the extra measures anyway, just to make sure."

The Big Test

The first big test for Harry came in the spring of 2014 at the world's biggest three-day event, the Badminton Horse Trials. Even by Badminton's standards, this was no ordinary course. It proved to be the toughest in its 56-year history—only one in three starters made it to the finish.

"The morning of Badminton, there really was no fear, just excitement to be back out there at the top level," Harry recalls. "I was feeling grateful for the opportunity to ride on such a big stage again. I wanted to embrace this opportunity; I told myself to enjoy it, to soak up the magnificent setting; to enjoy the crowds and the atmosphere, and to enjoy my horse at the top of his fitness.

“I was well aware of the risks, but I knew I belonged there. And I know what I do can be dangerous. There was no need to block that out; I was aware and accepting of it. In truth, I was delighted the course was so tough, as I felt it was an opportunity for me. The night before the cross-country test, they took out a fence—a very steep slope to an upright tree stump, probably the toughest on the course—and I was furious. I knew it would cause problems, and a lot of riders were worried about it. But I felt it was well within my horse’s and my capability.”

Harry’s ride at Badminton in 2014 is now part of eventing history: His fast and gutsy riding earned him a clear round, propelling him up the leaderboard to finish in third place. The performance would have been impressive in any normal year, but it was all the more remarkable given the fact that it marked his return from the horrific injuries and accompanying uncertainty.

Just Roll and Get Up

Harry also shared his perspective on falling.

“One of the things that didn’t help me was not falling off for a long time in the years prior to the bad fall,” he says. “Strangely enough, I’d hit the ground once in the previous seven years, and I believe that can perpetuate fear at the idea of falling off because I wasn’t used to the feeling.”

Harry shared a secret with me, whispering through the phone that the majority of the time “falling off doesn’t hurt.”

He admits, “I had a catastrophic one, but almost all of the time, falling off is not something to worry about. In 99 percent of the cases, you just roll and get up. And once you’ve overcome the thing you might be scared of, it makes it easier.”

This inspirational story of Harry Meade, who might have easily been paralyzed by fear after a near career-ending fall, is an opportunity for you to see how a world-class rider approached his own challenging situation, confronted a number of fears, and not only overcame it, but thrived.

What can *you* learn from Harry Meade and his story?

- 1 **Even great riders fall off and have fear.** Every rider will fall off—it's a reality of equestrian sport. Horses and situations can be unpredictable, so you will fall off and you probably won't know when it's going to happen. Remember, world-class eventer Michael Jung told me he has “fallen off 1,000 times, but it has given me the opportunity to learn something each time.” And, in Harry's words, “falling off doesn't really hurt—just roll and get up.”
- 2 **Harry planned his road back carefully, making it very easy in the beginning and setting a “dream” target for motivation. It was a process.** Slow and easy is the prudent way to come back from injury or having been out of the sport for a period of time. If you've had a trauma that sidelined you for a while, you need to give your body and mind time to heal and have your step-by-step return, starting small and building. Harry's idea of setting a target date to accomplish something big is a healthy idea and a great way to motivate yourself. Slowly build to the target.
- 3 **Harry was open and honest with himself, acknowledging the fall, the fear, and the chance the fall could impact his confidence.** Acknowledge the accident and that it is a reality of the sport. It happened and could happen again. Expressing the emotion is cathartic and mitigates the chances of feeling more fear when you return to riding. And addressing how you will prepare to come back with a confident feeling should be a part of the process.
- 4 **The fall gave Harry the opportunity to think about how much he loved the sport.** Time away is a wonderful opportunity to evaluate your reason for riding. Why do you do it? What do you love about it? Being away from the sport may spark feelings about how much you miss it and could ignite a renewed passion for the sport, like it did for Harry.

- 5** **Anxiety and fear were trumped by Harry’s purpose and the gratefulness he felt for the opportunity to ride again.** Balance your own anxiety and fear with your purpose for riding. Remember that you don’t *have* to ride. It’s an opportunity—something special you *get* to do. Be grateful for the chance to ride again and every day moving forward. Replace your feeling of fear with a highly positive emotion like gratefulness. Harry told me he never resented his injuries. He says he actually felt thankful that the injuries were to his arms and not his head and neck.

Fear Is Normal

You learned about emotion and ideas on how to regulate it in chapter 5 (p. 78). But fear, as the oldest and strongest emotion of human beings, really does stand alone and certainly deserves its own chapter. It can be a pivotal factor in whether you Ride Big or ride small.

It’s okay for you to have and feel fear. If you didn’t, you wouldn’t be human. It is the most primal human emotion and an integral part of your life. Like other emotions, it’s a message, a signal that something needs attention from you. Healthy fear is your friend.

But it’s also not particularly fun to feel paralyzing fear when it comes to your performance and your riding. I am certain you would rather be abundantly confident and have that feeling of knowing, and not have the uncertainty where fear derives its energy.

When I talked to the world-class riders featured in this book, they all acknowledged that they feel fear. But it may not be the same degree of fear that you feel. Olympic gold medalist Michael Jung explained to me, “Any fear I have is far more of a ‘healthy respect.’ It’s not the type of fear you are talking about—the type that can paralyze you. I prepare as well as I can, but I know something can go wrong and I respect that possibility.”

Each of the great equestrians I talked to acknowledged that equestrian sport is a bit different from other sports. You can get seriously hurt.

Your Body Prepares for the Threat

You know all about the feelings of fear.

When you perceive a threat in any way, the biology of your body prepares you for a response. Remember the emotional process I talked about on p. 80—the idea of your body constructing the emotion based on your needs? Well, in the case of fear, the amygdala and other supporting cast members of your brain prepare you for a threat response. As with other emotions, your amygdala may also add meaning and intensity to the fear, pulling from past experience in your emotional memory. This process prepares your body for the perceived threat by flooding your brain with neurohormones that travel to your cells, beginning an action of shutting down some of your body's systems. When triggered, the threat response becomes the body's top priority.

Emotions are highly contagious between horse and rider.

This all leads to some specific changes to your body to ensure efficiency for you in the perceived dangerous situation. Breathing accelerates, heart rate and blood pressure rise, blood flow and increase of glucose to the muscles build. While some functions speed up, others slow down.

Your ability to think is reduced—critical thought, problem-solving, and even creativity are limited. In a complex equestrian environment where adapting to what's in front of you is central to doing well, you need these abilities when you ride.

Remember, too, from chapter 5 (p. 78), that emotions are highly contagious—not only between human beings but between horse and rider. As you have probably experienced, any fear you feel in the saddle registers on your horse's radar and becomes his fear. So, your perception of a threat, and the resulting response, can influence not only your performance, but the performance of your partner. This likelihood of transferring your fear makes it doubly important that your emotional fear response is in check.

The real trick in your riding is coping with the fears you might have, and like Harry Meade, creating perspective and eliminating your perceived fears with a powerful, grounded structure-like purpose, the skill of

self-awareness, acknowledgment of vulnerability, and a healthy perception. Fear is really your brain asking you the question, “Am I certain?”

Fear and Riding Small

For a minute, let’s go back to chapter 1 (p. 6) and look at the characteristics I introduced that contribute to equestrians riding small. You might recognize some of them. You’ll also notice that they all, in some way, are about your uncertainty, which will fuel your fear.

The rider who rides small:

- is filled with doubt—he isn’t sure he can do it
- uses a fraction of his abilities
- plays it safe
- is anxious and hesitant in pressure situations
- rides on either side of the present moment (past or future)
- is distracted by the outcome
- is trying not to lose instead of trying to win

Remember that professional show jumper Mattias Tromp described Riding Big as “riding without the fear of loss, without the hindrance of what *could* go wrong. Riding small is the exact opposite—being fearful of making a mistake and never truly feeling in sync with your horse.”

Fear thrives on uncertainty; it is a warning that there is a potential risk. In each of the characteristics of riding small I’ve listed there is an uncertainty and potential distraction that limits self-expression—a focus on the unknown. This is where the tension is between confidence and fear. Confidence is “knowing”—a certainty you can do it when it counts. So, there’s the tension: knowing and not knowing. Riding Big is elusive when fear is pervasive.

You know that fear and riding small go together.

Now, let’s look at some typical equestrian fears that might be holding you back. I’ll also focus on how some certainty can be created for you, giving you a better perspective and the opportunity to be confident.