

MENTAL MANAGEMENT



ITS NOT JUST FOR PEOPLE

By Kenda Lenseigne

As I sit in the alley, I hear the announcer call my name.... "Kenda Lenseigne, you're three away". My stomach has been working overtime all day in subconscious anticipation of this moment and manages to tie another knot deep in my gut. My heart thumps so loudly in my ears that I glance around to see if anyone else can hear it over the gunfire in the arena. My hands have the shakes and my breathing becomes erratic and short.

Now I'm "on deck" to ride, and have been so focused on my own inner mayhem over the impending 10 balloons that I didn't even notice that my horse is mimicking all of the self induced emotions that I'm feeling. Her heart pounds though 2" of pad and saddle leather, so much that as I look down I can actually see her mane pulsating with each beat of her heart. Her stomach - ahem - is clearly as upset as mine, and her breathing tempo increases to match her heart rate.

We're both a mess... a ball of endocrinatic-fed nerves that started in my brain and has worked its way down to the bottom of her hooves. This type of energy can often inspire chaos that shows up in the form of run-offs, punted barrels, missed targets or just a general lack of power steering or brakes. The chances of everything falling into place in order to win the buckle when undirected adrenaline is racing through our veins are as uncertain as a crap shoot in Vegas.... That is, UNLESS we know how to manage it, how to turn it into

fuel instead of allowing it to be our kryptonite.

A-D-R-E-N-A-L-I-N-E

As humans, we know what adrenaline is and for a lot of us, its what keeps us addicted to this love-hate mounted shooting game, even though we confuse our directives by hating the shakes prior to the run and then loving them afterwards. It makes no sense, and yet we all drive countless hours and pay extraordinary entry fees because we can't get enough, weekend after weekend.

But what about our four-legged teammate? As far as I can see, horses have been hard-wired for adrenaline production, but not given a manual to understand this rocket juice that races through their blood. If we really think about it, the only time a horse turns on the adrenaline switch in a natural environment is when they are in mortal fear of something, be it fleeing for their life from a predatory wild animal or some other imminent danger. Like a plastic bag.

Fear is fear, and a horse's first thought is "flight". Adrenaline triggers an instinct born into them to run away; so why haven't we considered this aspect of the horse's mind when we make a mounted shooting training plan for them? We just assume that they love an adrenaline rush as much as we do, that they should embrace the heady mixture of excitement that hangs in the air like gunsmoke in a coliseum. Maybe we assume that horses understand it just the same as we do.

Well, they don't. At least, not right at first anyway. As with everything, each horse's temperament is different, and how they manage adrenaline is also different. Some wind up the coo-coo clock and turn into a fire breathing dragon on two legs when they enter the arena where others seem cool and collected until they exit, then act like a tetherball at the end of the rein. Some good ol' boys simply walk out, blow their nose, lick their lips and fish around in our pockets until they find a snack.

COPE MANAGEMENT

When considering ways to train or work our horses, we have to first acknowledge what triggers the release of adrenaline, and then teach our horses how to manage their behavior when they get the "shakes".



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- **A proper warmup.** Have you ever considered why kids have recess during the school day? A little harmlessly burned energy is key to a proper thinking brain. Along those lines, a long and slow warmup is essential for all athletes, and horses are not excluded. Getting on our horse ten minutes before the stage doesn't count, and only one warm up session in the morning, when the horse has been tied to the trailer all day doesn't count either. A worn down mind/warmed up body is adrenaline's neutralizer, which helps to turn adrenaline in to essential fuel instead of a boiling, code-red meltdown. A tired pony is often a functional pony.
- **Check your nerves at the gate.** I know my horse is smart, but she can't possibly know my name over the PA system. Her heart doesn't start thumping until mine does. I have learned to take deep breaths, and relax in the saddle before I ride in. When I breathe, she breathes, and in contrast, when I'm radiating unmanaged energy, she dances the jitterbug.
- **Turn the mirror over.** It's always enlightening to step back and learn that we may have interfered with our horse's confidence when attempting to diagnose behavior issues. My horse used to tap dance around after his run when trying to dismount and take his leg boots off. I would get annoyed with him and ultimately lose my patience. Now, instead of trying to "train" him to stand perfectly, I simply let him walk it out until his adrenaline has subsided and he is ready to be his normal self again. We both win that way - and I don't overreact to his overreacting.
- **Give them time.** "He acts this way as soon as he hears shooting" And he may, but that doesn't mean he will act that way forever with patience, time, and a better understanding of the gunfire-adrenaline cocktail that he's about to drink. He will learn over time that this game is FUN, and start to crave the shakes after the run just like we do. Having a good experience in the arena every time helps to achieve this level of understanding. Pretty soon, the cuckoo will have all four hooves on the ground, and the tetherball will be fishing around for his snack.

