

# A Competitive Spirit

**There are a** lot of things you can do horseback, and I've been blessed to have the opportunity to try quite a few different disciplines in my life. While there are some I definitely favor over others, there is only one I really just don't like, and that is trail riding.

I know what you're thinking: Who doesn't like to go out for a nice, leisurely trail ride? If I'm being completely honest, I don't. I have friends who can't wait to load up and explore new trails, but I've never had any desire to join them. Truth be told, I find the whole trail riding experience rather boring. I imagine there are more than a few of you out there who can relate.

Give me a goal to work toward, though, and I'm happy as a clam. I'd much rather have a competition looming on the horizon, with clear-cut tasks to tackle and perfect during each training ride. The competitive side of me craves the challenge of pushing myself and my horse to be the best we can be, individually and as a team.

That's why within weeks of spontaneously buying a horse last year, I was working on a game plan. And on the second Sunday in October, that plan came to fruition when I showed Nicky for the first time. There were only four people in our class, but the red reserve championship ribbon we earned meant the world to me because it represented a year's worth of hard work and sacrifices.

Not too long ago, I might have been disappointed that the red ribbon wasn't blue. I used to focus on winning more than anything. Now, I realize there are things that matter more than being No. 1. Psychology Today calls that the difference between good competitiveness and bad competitiveness.

Adrian Furnham, Ph.D., wrote: "Good competitiveness is the drive to accomplish a goal, to bring out the best in individuals, indeed help them understand themselves.

"Bad competitiveness is winning at any cost: it sneers at the outmodish negativity of the old aphorism 'It's not whether you win or lose, but how you play the game.' Losing is for wimps and failures."

I have seen both kinds of competitiveness in the Western performance horse arena, and you probably have, too. A person with a good competitive spirit can review his or

her performance, win or lose, and see it for what it is. A person with bad competitiveness – someone you might call a sore loser – isn't happy with anything less than a win

I'm glad that, for me, wisdom has come with age, and my brain is firmly rooted in good competitiveness. I am able to look at my performances on Nicky and see where we each need to improve. I listened to my trainer's analysis and checked the judge's comments on my scorecard. Then I revised my plan and set new goals. By next spring, I want to be more comfortable jumping higher fences, and, more importantly, I want to be able to relax and manage my show nerves.

On which side of the line does your competitive spirit land? Do you embrace good competitiveness and work to better yourself with each performance, cherishing the wins when they come? Or is winning the most important thing on your agenda? If it's the latter, there is some research that you are sabotaging your own happiness by doing so.

A comparative study of 42 nations around the world showed that happiness decreases as the level of competition increases in a given society. That's bad news for those of us in America. According to the World Values Survey, Americans' approval of competition is unmatched by any other industrialized country on earth.

When a person becomes obsessed with winning, all sorts of bad things can happen. Relationships can be negatively affected as one loses sight of everything else, including the value of people who don't win. In the zero-sum world of sports competition, for one person to win, someone else must lose. Anthropologist Jules Henry described the social implications by saying, "A competitive culture endures by tearing people down."

Experts say the antidote to obsessive competitiveness is cooperation. Luckily, in the Western performance horse industry, we see a lot of cooperation, especially in events that require cattle. A cutter can't compete without the cooperation of four helpers, who are often competing against him in the same class. None of us enter a class to lose, but at the same time, we often find ourselves rooting for our fellow exhibitors, too.

Cooperation is a good thing, and only

by coming together can we solve some of the horse industry's heaviest issues, such as neglect and abuse, slaughter, a shrinking population, and older demographic. But I will always believe in the benefits of competition, as long as your competitiveness tilts toward the good side of the scale more often than the bad.

Which side you land on can depend on why you compete in the first place. People compete for a variety of reasons, including attention, money, validation, a sense of belonging, the challenge of facing others head to head and self-improvement.

Why do I compete? Two reasons: One, I like the challenge of competition, though I have learned not to base my self-worth on the outcome of a class at a horse show; and two, I enjoy the self-improvement that inevitably comes.

I've found some like-minded individuals at Training Think Tank, an online community of coaches, athletes and intellectuals who share an ideology in which they strive to create optimal states of mind and body. They say, "Striving to be your best, in front of other people, is a tremendous catalyst for forward momentum. If you are competing to be a better version of yourself, just remember never to lose sight of that. Remember not to let yourself get caught up in someone else's value system and enjoy the process of growth. Your path is yours and you should feel lucky to be able to walk it in whatever form it plays out."

I consider myself lucky that my path has once again led me to the competition arena, because the horse show world is where I feel the most comfortable and where I will always belong.

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