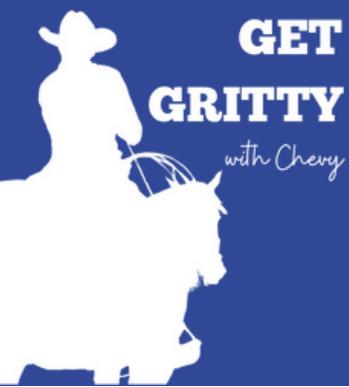


# CONFIDENT & COMPETITIVE COWGIRL

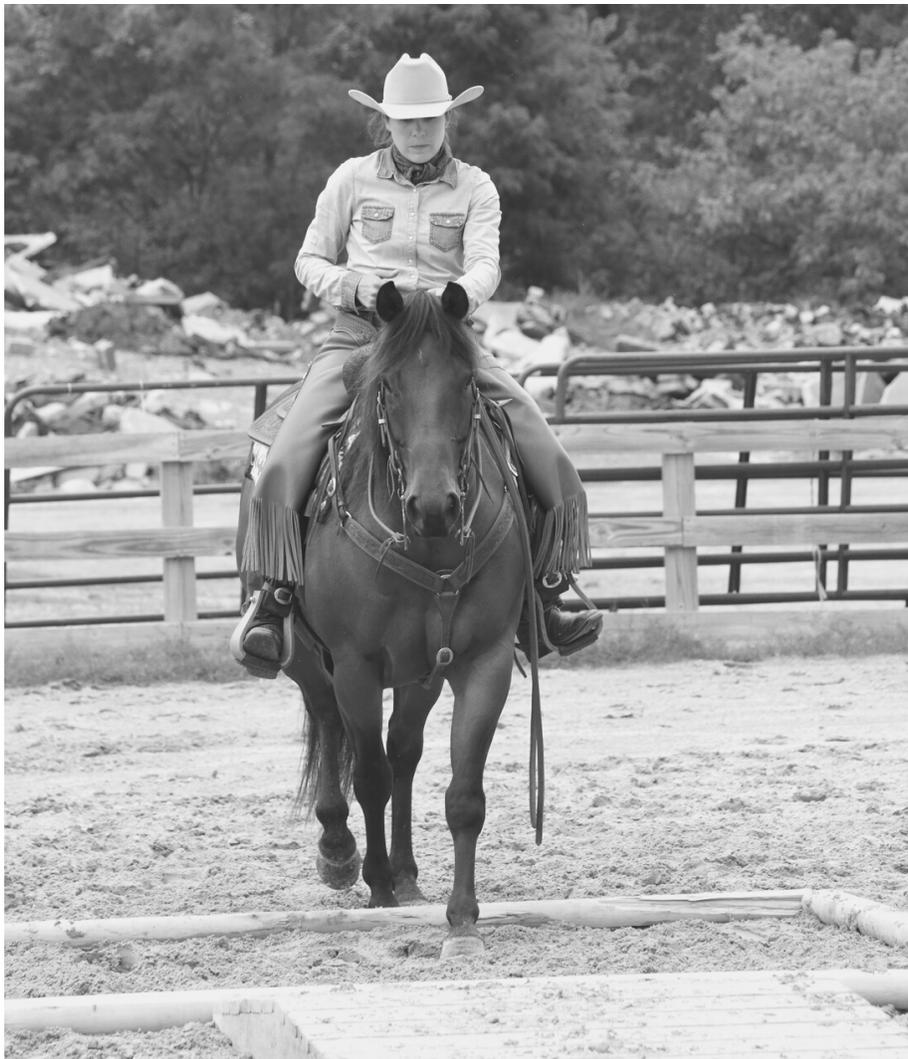


Mental Skills for Cowgirls that want to Get Gritty, Face their Fears, Live their Dreams and Be Confident in the Competition Arena.

**WEEK 3:**  
**MENTAL SKILLS TO SOLVE**  
**COMMON SHOW PEN CHALLENGES**

*"Concentration and mental toughness  
are the margins of victory."*

*Bill Russell*



# OVERCOMING SHOW NERVES

Show nerves, jitters, or feelings of pressure can wreck havoc on your performance in the show pen.

They can cause your brain to switch on the stress or fight-flight-freeze response. This ramps up your heart and breathing rates so that enough oxygen gets to your muscles. Your palms might get sweaty, your stomach queasy. The thinking part of the brain shuts down, and the primitive, reactive side of the brain takes over. This leads to rushing, forgetting patterns, and thoughts focused on doubts and fears.

Unfortunately, your brain's stress response doesn't know the difference between a real danger and a perceived or psychological danger. So while the stress response might be helpful to get us through a saber tooth tiger attack, it isn't helpful when dealing with non-life threatening show jitters.

So how do you break out of the stress response to transform pressure to power?

Breathe!

# **KEEP CALM AND JUST BREATHE!**

Breathing. It is an automatic function of our bodies, that most of the time we aren't even consciously aware of. We don't need to think about it, we just do it. After all, if you didn't breathe, you wouldn't survive for very long.

The simple act of breathing does more than just bring air in and out of your lungs. By focusing on your breathing, you can reconnect with the present moment.

By focusing on your breathing, you can break out of the Stress (Fight-Flight-Freeze) Response, letting your body know that there is no immediate danger, and shifting yourself back to the Relaxation (Rest & Digest) Response.

I do get annoyed by people who scoff at the idea that focusing on and controlling your breathing can help shift you from fear to calm. "Telling someone who is feeling anxious or nervous to just breathe doesn't work," they say.

# **KEEP CALM AND JUST BREATHE!**

I liken the practice of breathing techniques to one-rein stops.

Being able to pick up on a rein and bend your horse to a stop is a handy tool to have in your toolkit. For us to trust that our horse will stop using this tool at any time, in any location, and at any speed, we recognize that we practice it a lot. The horse needs to be taught this response in a calm and controlled environment. It takes many, many repetitions for this to become an automatic response. Yet I have seen many riders just practice this once or twice, then wonder why it didn't work when their horse got spooked out on the trail.

Breathing exercises are the same thing. In order for a breathing exercise to work and help you shift from a high Stress or Fight-Flight-Freeze Response to a calmer Relaxation or Rest & Digest Response, you need to practice it before you need it.

Breathing exercises are simple. The key here is to practice them enough so that they are automatic, like a one-rein stop.

# **BENEFITS OF BETTER BREATHING**

## Reduces Tension

- Signals the rest & digest, relaxation response

## Improves Posture

- Fast and shallow breathing leads to tipped forward, top heavy, crouching posture
- Deep and relaxed breathing leads to lowered center of gravity, deeper more secure seat

## Increases Rider Stamina

- Increased oxygen available to body and brain leads to a rider with more stamina, reduced muscle fatigue

## Relaxed and Focused Horse

- A rider that is calm and breathing correctly sends a confident message to their horse

## Rhythm, Regularity, Even Tempo

- A rider that is breathing with a regular and even tempo encourages the horse's gaits to be rhythmic and regular

## Clearer Thinking

- Your brain needs oxygen! It is just 2% of your body weight, but uses 20% of your oxygen-breathe correctly to feed your brain!

# **BREATHING TECHNIQUES**

Are you breathing correctly?

Diaphragmatic, or belly breathing is the most efficient way to breathe. Place one hand on your belly, and the other on your chest, and take a deep breath. Which hand moves?

**Square Breathing Exercise:**

Inhale to the count of 4

Hold for the count of 4

Exhale to the count of 4

Hold for the count of 4

Square Breathing is great for events where you need to be focused, alert, and able to quickly respond, such as timed events, cattle events, etc.

**5-2-7 Breathing Exercise:**

Inhale to the count of 5

Hold for the count of 2

Exhale to the count of 7

The longer exhale in this breathing technique is more relaxing. This technique is great for events when calmness is preferred, like rail classes, trail, reining, etc.

# **BREATHING BREAKS**

## Plan Breathing Breaks to Perform Better

Most events have pauses when you can breathe.

When you plan how you will ride, include where you will breathe. This can be planning a deep breath between cattle in cutting, exhaling as you sit to turn a barrel, breathing as you build a loop in roping, taking a breath when you transition to a walk in a ranch riding class, etc.

# **GRITTY RIDERS VIEW MISTAKES DIFFERENTLY**

We all make mistakes. It is an inevitable part of competing, riding horses, and even just part of life in general. When we make mistakes in competition, it can cause a domino effect, resulting in a loss of concentration, negative self-talk, and more mistakes. Most riders blame themselves, their horse, or other factors. This causes a negative spiral.

Gritty Riders view mistakes differently. Mistakes are not bad, as long as you are not repeating the same mistake over and over. Mistakes are proof that you are taking actions of confidence and getting outside of your comfort zone. Mistakes inform you of what you need to work on. Start to celebrate your mistakes—they are how you get better!

In competition, gritty riders have a plan for when they make mistakes to prevent the mistake from affecting the rest of their performance. You can have the same advantage as these gritty, confident competitors by creating your own post mistake ritual.

# **POST MISTAKE RITUALS**

What is a post mistake ritual?

It is a mental technique that lets you recognize a mistake, then quickly put it behind you so that you can refocus on the present moment and what you need to do right now to perform at your peak. It is a skill that you pre-plan and practice ahead of time, until it becomes second nature. And, it works best when it is personalized, an action, word, or phrase that suits you.

So how can you create your own, personalized post mistake ritual?

Choose what works best for your riding discipline. If you compete in fast paced events, a short phrase will work better for you than an action. If your discipline has pauses after maneuvers, or breaks between classes, then an action post mistake ritual might work better for you.

# POST MISTAKE RITUALS

## Phrase Post-Mistake Rituals:

Phrases are the quickest post mistake rituals. Choose a phrase that is positive and easy to remember.

Some examples of Phrase Post-Mistake Rituals are:

- “Next time”
- “No Problem”
- “Let’s Go”
- “Ride on”
- “Cowgirl Up!”
- and of course, “Get Gritty!”

## Action Post-Mistake Rituals:

Action post mistake rituals are the most powerful, since they replace the mistake with a concrete action. Some riders pair their action with a phrase too.

However, it may not always be possible to pause to do an action post mistake ritual in fast paced events.

Some example Action Post Mistake Rituals include:

- Take a deep breath, and breathe out the mistake.
- Brush away the mistake by “brushing” your horse’s neck with your hand.
- Shrug your shoulders to “shrug off” the mistake.
- Shake your hands/arms to shake it off.

# **POST MISTAKE RITUALS**

There are a few keys to give your post mistake ritual more power so that it is more effective for you.

1. Use it EVERY time you make a mistake-even in practice. By practicing the ritual, you train yourself to do it, so that it becomes an unconscious response to making a mistake, that way you don't need to think about it during competition.

2. The idea of the post mistake ritual is to set the mistake aside to process later, so that you can focus on the current moment and get back to performing at your peak. So, for it to work, you need to actually go back after the practice/competition, and process the mistake. This can be a discussion with your trainer/instructor, or journaling about the mistake. You need to process what happened, and what you can do to prevent the mistake from happening again.

# **VISUALIZATIONS**

The ability to create a clear mental picture, also called mental imagery or visualizations, is a skill that successful and confident riders use to vividly imagine and mentally practice what they want to have happen with their horse. By practicing creating a clear mental picture of what you want, you can build your confidence-and you can even use this mental skill when you are not with your horse!

The most common use for visualizations in competitions is for patterns. The same guidelines apply for mental imagery as for positive affirmations. After all, you are programming your subconscious mind with what you want to have happen in the show pen!

# **COMPETITION VISUALIZATIONS**

To have your competition visualizations be structured and productive, instead of just aimless daydreaming, first start by brainstorming so that you can plan what to include in your competition visualization.

What thoughts, feelings, images and power words help you to be at your best with your horse?

Visualize Confidence. Write down what confidence feels like to you. Is it knowing that you are prepared? Believing in yourself and your horse?

Include a Positive Performance Affirmation. For example: "I am a relaxed rider."

# **MORE VISUALIZATION TIPS**

To make your competition visualizations most effective, here are some more ideas to include:

Describe the environment. The sounds of the crowd, the judge standing, etc. I like to look at the arena I will show in and note specific markers to include in my visualizations, for example, picking out a banner to look up and ride straight towards.

Be specific about how you will ride and how you will cue your horse.

What about your horse? What is your horse doing? Clearly picture the actions, movements, and responses of your horse.

Make it as realistic as possible. This should be a stride by stride, maneuver by maneuver description.

Everyone is different. Some riders find it helpful to write out their visualization. Others like to draw it. Some talk through it. Some can run through their visualization in their head at the in gate, others need to find a quiet spot alone to do this. Experiment and find what works for you!