



WELLBEING SERIES

MOTIVATION

WHAT DRIVES YOU? WHAT INSPIRES YOU? **ANDREA OAKES** LOOKS AT WHAT FUELS OUR DESIRE TO ACHIEVE GOALS: MOTIVATION.

Most people involved with horses are all too familiar with the lurching, rollercoaster ride through the highs and lows of the sport, from a big win to bad luck as a horse goes lame or an unexpected bill breaks the bank. Weathering these inevitable ups and downs can be tough. Almost as tricky, however, is dealing with some of the gaps in between, when progress seems non-existent and even getting out of bed each morning feels like a mountain to climb.

Motivation can desert us just when we need it most, leading us to ask ourselves. 'Why are we doing this?'

According to sport and exercise psychologist Professor Moira Lafferty, it's common to become trapped in a downwards spiral when things don't go our way.

"A decrease in confidence and motivation is often accompanied by feelings of stress and anxiety," she explains. "This can cause biological responses in the body, leading to lack of sleep and the associated problems of fatigue and disruption of healthy eating habits. These physiological reactions mean that we have even less energy and motivation, which leaves us feeling that we can't achieve our goals."

THE FIRST AND MOST IMPORTANT THING IS TO HAVE A LONG-TERM GOAL - A REALISTIC YET CHALLENGING AIM THAT YOU REALLY BELIEVE IN

Not surprisingly, this circle can impact on both wellbeing and performance. So how can we break out of the trap, rebuilding motivation and maintaining it through the difficult times?

The first and most important thing is to have a long-term goal – a realistic yet challenging aim that you really believe in.

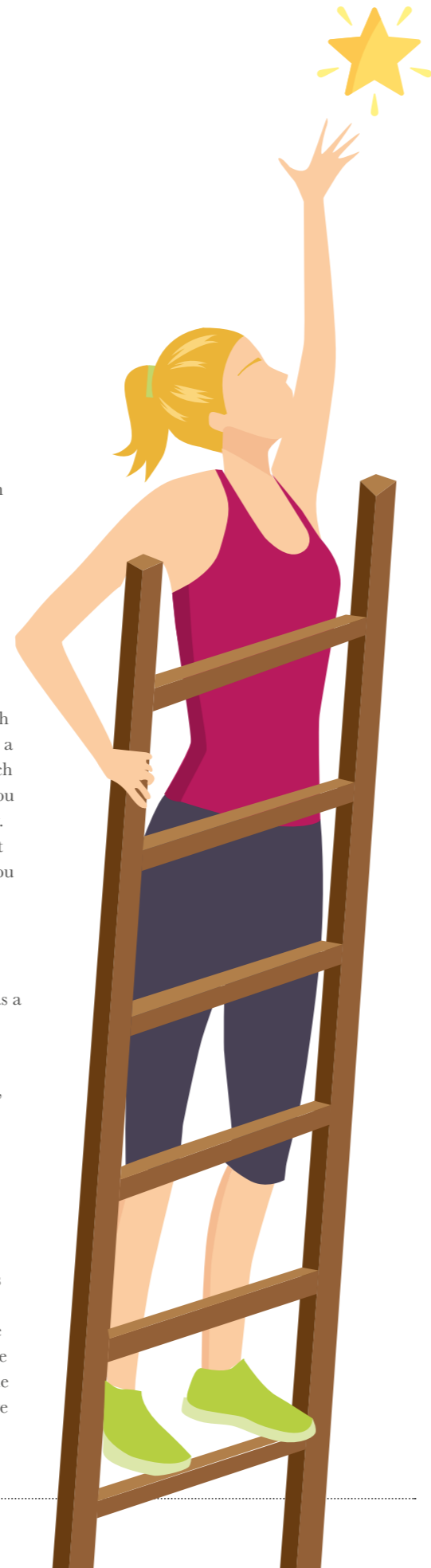
"A good coach should be able to help you set a plan," says Moira, who has worked with numerous young riders. "Ideally you'll have a positive working partnership with your coach – they should be part of your journey, but you should always have control over the journey. Otherwise, try to use someone else you trust as a sounding board. By involving others, you won't have to tread the sometimes long and lonely path alone.

"Once you've decided on a goal, write it down," she adds. "Put it on paper in a goal-setting diary or pin it up on the wall to act as a constant reminder."

Moira then advises breaking your goal down into achievable stages.

"Think of the journey as a flight of steps," she suggests. "Climbing one step at a time helps develop confidence and maintains motivation. Without the small goals and the feeling of achievement, confidence and motivation can diminish. Review your progress often and you'll see that you're still moving towards that goal, even if your steps are very small."

To illustrate the point, Moira refers to the swimmer Michael Phelps. From an early age he not only wrote down his goals but also the split times needed and how he would achieve them. A three-second improvement (that's around 10% in dressage terms) for a ▶



swimmer seems unrealistic, but when broken down over an Olympic cycle it equates to a more manageable one second each year. When broken down even further, into hundreds of training sessions, the goal seems – and is – more achievable.

This goal-setting strategy can be applied to any area of life, not just riding. Equestrian sport, however, can call for a more adaptable approach.

"Because there are two athletes and just one performance in equestrian sport, your goal will always need to be flexible and under constant review," explains Moira, referring to the myriad ways that horses can become ill or injured and send best-laid plans off-track. "Dressage in particular can be quite isolating, so try to surround yourself with the support team that works for you. For some this will include a coach. For others, a partner, parent or friend.

"If problems occur, allow yourself to take a step back to come to terms with the adversity and the challenge of the situation you're in," she adds. "Perhaps you need to set an interim

goal, or re-adjust your plan. If your horse is lame and on box rest, for example, could you use the time to take lessons on a schoolmaster or improve your core fitness at the gym? Ask yourself, 'How can I still move forwards?'"

There are lots of techniques you can use to boost your motivation when times get tough.

"Try reminding yourself of key messages, or choose some music that creates a feel-good factor," suggests Moira. "Keeping a diary will make it easier to recognise progress. At the end of each day, take a moment to look back over what you've done and note what you've achieved. There's always something – it doesn't have to be big or even riding-related. Tidying the tack room if the weather is too bad to ride is an achieved goal and will contribute to performance, as you will be more organised if things are easier to find.

"If you're working with a horse, what's most important is to finish each session as friends," she adds. "Maybe today wasn't a good day, but you're still a partnership. If things becomes a chore you'll lose enjoyment and your confidence and motivation will go down. Work on the technique of seeing three positives for every negative – identifying three things you're happy with for every point that needs improvement.

With a clear plan, a healthy lifestyle and supportive people around you, motivation should come more easily. But, however driven you are, don't be afraid to cut yourself some slack along the way.

"Set your goal, but visualise the journey to it as a piece of elastic," says Moira. "Be prepared to be flexible and to re-evaluate and re-adjust your aims as necessary. If you're doing the right thing, you should be able to stop every now and then and think: 'I enjoy what I do.'" ■

THE SLIGHT EDGE

Abi Hutton has found a renewed sense of direction since reading Jeff Olson's book 'The Slight Edge'.

"Rather than waiting for a big break or expecting a quick fix, the book reminds you that success is all about cementing little habits," says Abi, who trains and competes alongside her husband Charlie. "These could be as simple as making your bed or doing 10 minutes' exercise each morning, but they grow over time so you become a bit better each day. I found it really motivational."

Abi, who has regular sessions with sport psychologist Camilla Henderson, adds, "Some people are daunted by one big goal, so my motto is 'one step at a time'. I can scare myself easily and convince myself that I'm not good enough, so I look at things in bite-sized chunks and break each goal down into more achievable aims.

"This year I went to the World Young Horse Championships – a huge ambition of mine. Sadly, my horse sustained a minor injury when we got there, but leading up to the competition I did a lot of writing down and reflecting. It helped, even if was just a few lines saying 'I was really scared but I still got on and cantered around the arena'. It's easy to forget the little triumphs."

