

MIND

By Alicen Divita

Step 1: Create a Mental Checklist

Have you ever planned what you were going to think about in a situation before it happened? For every vaulting routine you perform, have a mental routine to go along with it. Grab a piece of paper and list every aspect of each move in your routine. Include corrections from your trainer, the way you're gripping the handles, how tightly you have to squeeze your legs, where you are in the music—as many things as you can imagine. This list will become an important part of your visualization routine.

Step 2: Find the General Feeling

Specifics then lead to a move's general feeling—a perfect picture of what that move looks and feels like. Try imagining how it feels to be performing the move perfectly and also what it looks like, as if watching yourself vault. You may also find it helpful to have an anchor word for each of your moves. It can be something as basic as “toes” if that is something you tend to forget or as abstract as “water” if you need to remember to be fluid with the horse. Once you get to a point where you can easily picture each move perfectly on its own, you can begin to visualize your entire routine.

Step 3: Play with Time

Try visualizing your routine in slow motion, without any time reference, and think about the specifics of each move in your routine in the order you perform them. When you're not limited by four strides you can imagine every aspect of each move. As you get good at this, run through your routine at competition pace, using anchor words and general feelings. Eventually, you should be able to run through your entire routine very quickly, bringing to mind your entire mental routine including your anchor words or cues.

Step 4: Add Music

Certain points in your music can act as anchors. For example, in addition to knowing that you have to start your needle right as the chorus starts up, you can also use it as a reminder to straighten your leg. Visualizing your routine while listening to your music gives you a sense of how much time you actually have—a nice reality check amid all this mind work!

Step 5: Keep It Real

Regularly incorporate your mental training with physical training. Part of being a great athlete is accepting and embracing the imperfections and realities of your sport. Many issues exist in the real world that we just don't factor in while visualizing a perfect routine. Mental training is a great tool for making sure you are paying attention to important signals your body may be trying to send you.

As athletes, vaulters frequently encounter physical challenges and obstacles. Limited flexibility keeps some from the perfect needle. Limited strength keeps others from hitting handstands in scissors. When we fall short of our goals, vaulters tend to focus on tweaking their bodies to make their goals possible. But what about tweaking our minds and our perceptions?

The truth is our bodies are much stronger than we think they are, and often it is our thoughts, not our bodies, that keep us from reaching our physical limits. Unlike our bodies, our minds are not limited by the



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physical forces of the world. For example, you may not physically be able to hold a handstand on a cantering horse, but you can probably picture yourself balancing upside down for minutes without difficulty. If our minds are virtually limitless, why are we so often held back by mental qualities such as fear, nerves, and negative emotions? When it seems as if your mind is keeping you from doing things that your body would otherwise be capable of doing, it may be time to even out your physical exercise with some mental training.



Photo courtesy of Primo Ponies Photography

Step 6: Competitions Check-In

You are not alone if you tend to get nervous before you compete. In order to avoid being overwhelmed, do your mental training homework ahead of time. Know what you need to do in each move and in the routine as a whole. Nerves are manageable so long as they are directed at specific targets. About an hour before competing, check in with how you are feeling. Some days you may be feeling distracted and unfocused. Sit down in a quiet area and go through your routine in your mind until you feel you are connected with your thoughts. If this makes you feel overwhelmed, remind yourself that your body knows what to do after all your hard practice. Think of your anchor words and the rest will come naturally. In both practice and competition settings, never ignore how you are feeling. Instead, really tune in and use your emotions as a guide for how best to prepare yourself in the final moments.

Step 7: Finding “The Zone”

Ideally, by competition time you have thought about each move of your routine in so much detail that it is engraved in your body. You may have conscious cues for each move or section, but everything from your mental training comes naturally. Some people describe this feeling as being “in the zone”. It seems as though everything has slowed down because you are fully aware of all that is going on, yet you are completely relaxed and everything seems effortless. Once you’ve achieved the zone, you’ve achieved mental calmness!

Get a head start on your mental training this season by practicing visualization techniques every time you vault. Remember, mental training is a process, not a one-size-fits-all system. I am not suggesting that all of my ideas may work for you, but hopefully this article can serve as a launching point for developing a personalized plan that focuses on aspects of training you cannot physically see.

Interested in discussing this article with others in our vaulting community? Do you have a question, a comment, or an alternate point of view? Let’s “talk”! Go to the AVA members-only website, click on Forums (your same user name and password) and then find the section for Equestrian Vaulting magazine. Click on the article title and join in or start a dialogue with other members about what you just read!

About the Author: *Alicen Divita is a junior Interdisciplinary Studies major at The University of California Berkeley where she is studying psychology, neuroscience, Buddhist studies, and philosophy. She is a two time Gold Women’s Champion and has recently been selected to represent Team USA at the upcoming World Equestrian Games in Lexington, Kentucky—her third World Championships.*