Can Stress Affect Your Sports Performance?

By Debby Quigley

Stress is a feeling that is created when we react to particular events. It is the body’s way of rising to a challenge and preparing to meet a tough situation with focus, strength, stamina, and heightened alertness. A little stress or the right kind of positive stress can help keep you on your toes, ready to rise to any challenge.

The events that provoke stress are called stressors, and they cover a wide range of situations — everything from outright danger to stepping into the ring at a major competition. Stress can also be a response to change or anticipation of something that’s about to happen — good or bad. People can feel stress over positive challenges, like making a National team, as well as negative ones.

There are ways you can help yourself beat stress. Here are a few –

Preparation – Your Dog

One of the best ways to minimize stress when showing is being confident that your dog is prepared. That is, your dog has been properly trained. First, you must be sure that you have gone through all stages of training, teaching, randomizing reinforcements and most importantly “proofing.” These stages should be done with all parts of every exercise and skill that your dog will perform in the ring. This includes going to new locations to train on a regular basis. When doing so, note your dog’s attitude, attention and overall performance. Your dog should be able to correctly perform the skills and exercises with the attitude, drive and focus that you want to see when showing. This means “with no help or coaxing from you!” If possible, attend matches with the idea of “testing.” If your dog is well trained, understands the skills under all circumstances and with different variables, YOU will be more confident when walking into a ring!
Mental — You

So many times a great team heads to the ring only to fall apart when they enter. It is amazing to see how often the handler’s mental attitude affects the outcome of their performance. You spend so much time training your dog, covering all the aspects of training but do you do the same for yourself?

Before you show your dog for the first time, be sure to take the time to read the Regulations that apply to your chosen venue. It will tell you specifics such as what type of collar your dog may wear in the ring and what type of exercises your dog will have to perform and even the equipment used. It is best to know and understand the rules before you step into the ring with your dog.

Next, prepare yourself mentally. If you train in one mental state (calm and ready to act if your dog is incorrect or needs guidance) and you show in a different mental state (nervous, unsure and unconfident) your dog will respond likewise. After all you are a team and you are the leader!

Training “you” to mentally handle the stress in an ever-changing atmosphere of the ring should be at the top of your list for show preparation. Here is a list of the things that will help with mental toughness training.

1. **Focus on the Present** – Don’t think about what is going to happen in 20 minutes. Or even what happened in your past. Only focus on the present and taking that next step.

2. **Have a Short Memory** – Learn to let go and move on from failures and mistakes quickly so that you can achieve your goal.

3. **Stay Positive** – It is easy to become negative when a tough situation arises. Mentally practicing the ability to drive out the negative and reinforce the positive is an acquired skill. The easiest and best method is to control your thoughts.

4. **Get a Ritual** – We get up in the morning on the same side of the bed and brush our teeth. We get a cup of coffee and read email on our iPad. We go to train. We all have a ritual.

5. **Enjoy the Battle** – Telling yourself that you love the battle is a good starting point. Over time as you grow accustomed to this way of thinking you can embrace the thought. Start by telling yourself you are enjoying this tough competition and force yourself to “smile” inwardly. It works.

6. **Visualize your Future Self** – That’s right, get a mental picture of how you want your future self to be. In order to get through this current tough hardship you have to not only survive – but thrive. Think of your future self and how it will feel to accomplish your goal. Use details to create a positively charged emotion that your mind will connect with.

7. **Hang Around Winners** – To get better, you have to train with (and hang around) those that are at or above a level you want to be at. To get mentally tough you have to do the same. Get in an environment where only the tough survive and you will see your mental conditioning rise after the first day.

8. **Repeat Affirmations** – Mental affirmations are a great method to remain positive. Repeating words in your mind to help you focus on a task is an excellent way to cast off the extra chaos. It is harder for negative thoughts to enter your mind while you are chanting “I am a winner,” “I will overcome.” Come up with a few affirmations. Write them down and place them all around your house, car and in your training bag!

9. **Calm Yourself** – Have you noticed that the top competitors are calm during the toughest of situations? They have learned to calm themselves through conditioning to be ready for the unexpected. Yoga is an excellent method to calm your mind and body. The key is to find the method that works for you and begin to add it in to a daily routine.

**Routine — The Team**

Having a set routine is a final step to assuring a stress-free show. Make sure you and your canine partner get plenty of rest the night before the show. Pack your things the day before to save time and be sure to review driving directions. The morning of the show, allow yourself plenty of time to get ready in the morning and drive to the site. Make sure you eat a healthy breakfast and your dog has something tasty as well. Arrive at the show site early, set up your crate, check in and potty or exercise your dog and have some time to relax. Most importantly, before and after you show, pay attention to and reward your dog. Talking to others can wait. Remember your dog is there because you want him with you. You have both trained hard in order to show and you two work as a team. Show him the love he gives you every day and above all **ENJOY YOURSELF!**