

Nerves, Performance Anxiety, and Coping in Spite of It

By Denny Emerson

Competition creates pressure, plain and simple. I don't know anyone who competes who is immune to the nervousness of performance anxiety, usually to a manageable degree, but sometimes almost crushing in its intensity.

There was a professional hockey player for the Boston Bruins named Terry Sawchuk, a many times champion goalie, and he got so nervous that he threw up before every game. Barbra Streisand is another famous celebrity who gets so sick with nerves while sitting in her dressing room that she has to force herself on stage, but once she begins to sing, the fear goes away. No one is immune, not even the best of the best.

There's a saying that goes something like this, "The euphoria that you feel after the completion of some challenge is in direct proportion to the trepidation that you felt before you did it." The English poet, William Blake, wrote: "Great things are done when men and mountains meet. This is not the same as jostling in the street."

In 1992, I had taken my Thoroughbred stallion Epic Win to a three-day event at the former Olympic show grounds in Bromont, Quebec. Among those in my division was the two-time individual gold medalist Bruce Davidson, at that point perhaps the leading event rider in the world.

In a three-day event you perform your dressage test on the first day, your cross-country test on day two, and then you wrap up the event on the third day with a stadium jumping round. Any penalties in the three tests are added up, and the horse and rider pair with the fewest penalties is the winner.

After cross country I was in first place with Bruce Davidson right on my heels, less than three points behind me. If Bruce had a clear show jumping round, I had to be perfect to keep my winning spot since knocking down one rail would cost four penalties. To ramp up the pressure, riders go in reverse order of placing, so Bruce would ride next to last and Epic Win and I would be the last pair to jump.

Sure enough, in typical Bruce Davidson gold medal fashion, he jumped a clear round. As I entered that big arena I heard Nigel Casserly, the announcer, intone over the loudspeaker in his distinctive British accent, "And now entering the ring, our overnight leaders Denny Emerson and Epic Win. And they can't afford a rail."

Well, thank you, Nigel, for pointing that out—I hadn't given it a thought until this moment.

Epic and I did go clean, and we did get the victory that day,

one to savor considering the hard odds of competing against the very best rider on planet Earth.

I don't have any magic advice for making those nerves go away, although I have observed that if you are doing something often, it can lower the boiling point. An example would be some show where you are riding or driving in numerous classes instead of having to sit around and wait for one big class. Just hearing the loudspeaker, going through the gate, riding while being watched by the judge, the more often you do it the less frightening it becomes.

Another strategy is to know that you and your horse have done your homework and are completely and totally prepared. Additionally, one could create a sort of pretense that what we are doing just doesn't matter all that much, even though we know deep down that it does matter.

My former United States Equestrian Team coach, Jack LeGoff, before coming to the United States, had coached the French rider Jean-Jacques Guyon, riding Pitou, to the individual gold medal at the 1964 Olympics in Tokyo. Jack told us that Jean-Jacques, with a typically French dramatic personality, would get desperately nervous before his dressage test. On the day of dressage, Jack instructed Pitou's groom to tack him up and walk him around before it was time for Jean-Jacques to ride his test.

Then he called Jean-Jacques into the tack room where he poured two glasses of wine and lit two cigarettes. "Here Jean-Jacques, drink this! Here Jean-Jacques smoke this!" Then they sat on two tack boxes smoking and drinking and talking about the previous day's football soccer match that France had won until it was time for Jean-Jacques to get on Pitou and ride his test. Whatever warmup works, I guess?

Ultimately, the most important part of competing is simply being brave enough to show up and try. The following quotation from Theodore Roosevelt says it about as well as anything I've ever read or heard. "The credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena, whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood, who knows the great enthusiasms, the great devotions, and spends himself in a worthy cause; who at best, if he wins, knows the thrill of high achievement, and, if he fails, at least fails daring greatly so that his place shall never be with those cold and timid souls who know neither victory nor defeat."

Who wants to be labeled as a cold and timid soul? It's worth enduring some nervous hours to avoid that fate! ■



The author taking his victory lap after a clean round on Epic Win in Bromont, Quebec, 1992
(photo © Cealy Tetley).