Imagery
Module Four, Session Four

In this session of The Performance Project, I'm going to talk about using imagery as a mindset mastery tool to access courage and build your confidence. I've found the use of imagery to be impactful for riders who want to improve their focus and their ability to ride well under pressure. The use of imagery in sports has been around for decades. There's been a ton of research done on the topic. From the science, we know that using mental imagery can help improve focus, increase confidence and inspire motivation. We've more recently learned that by strengthening neural pathways in the brain, it can also improve physical skill. It goes without saying that all of these support and enhance your horse's performance as well.

So, imagery is very personal. Different things work for different people. You may have to get creative and make up your own or modify my suggestions.

Here is one I use a lot: We call it "The Bubble." Imagine you're surrounded by a large, invisible bubble. Inside the bubble is everything that you can control. Your thoughts, your breathing, and the speed with which you do things. Your muscle tension, your decisions about your warm up, your preparation, your aids, your attitude toward your horse are all inside the bubble. Outside the bubble is everything you can't control. The weather, the environment, the opinions of others, the show schedule, the footing, distracting noises and other riders. Inside your bubble, you are at your best. You are safe from chaos and pressure because you control the environment inside your bubble. You choose how to respond to every circumstance that arises. You do not allow your thoughts to leave your bubble so you focus only on the things you CAN control, not on things you can't. As soon as you feel yourself start to become scattered or unfocused you get right back into your bubble.

Once, I had a client tell me that she was packing up her "bubble" to take with her

to a clinic. The bubble really works for her and she's been taking it with her to every show and clinic since! Someone else I shared that image with turned it into a huge, rolling hamster wheel because that's what worked for her.

Here is another image I use. This one is called, "the box". Before you get in the saddle, take any ANTs, worries and distractions- put them in an imaginary box. Close the box, secure it tightly and put it aside. Be free from those things during your ride. If they start sneaking back into your psyche, remind yourself that they are locked up tightly and refocus on your mantra, your power persona, your bubble or whatever matters most in the moment. Eventually you'll be able to remove the box entirely from your mind so that all those ANTs stay put and don't interrupt your sacred riding time!

Imagery can also be used to improve particular skills. Let's say you are struggling with a transition from trot to walk that is a little messy. Maybe it's abrupt and you're losing your balance. You know what aids you're supposed to use for a smooth, uphill transition but you're having trouble making it happen. STOP. PAUSE. HALT. Whatever. If you need to get off your horse you can. Take 5 minutes to mentally review exactly what that smooth, uphill downward transition feels like. Mentally practice having your body in just the right place. Mentally go through the aids you'll use, how you'll sit and what your horse's response will feel like. Once you've imagined the transition you want a few times, in great detail, then start with the easiest version of the skill you are working on. In this case, that's likely a walk to halt transition or even a downward transition within the walk or trot. If things get messy again, stop and repeat using the imagery of your awesome super-duper downward transition. Repeat until you feel real improvement in your trot to walk transitions. This is often a missing piece of our learning process as riders. Using imagery during the messy middle can help speed up skill acquisition as well as improve confidence.

Once you experiment with these, you'll probably come up with imagery of your own. I'd love to hear about what works for you. The key to using imagery successfully is using it repeatedly and of course, being imaginative. Have fun!