



[Photo by Susan J Stickle](#)

Talking fitness with Allison Brock

By Anna Bergenstrahle

What would it feel like to ride in the Olympics – not to mention to win an Olympic medal? While most of us would perhaps never admit to having these thoughts – it is likely that many of us do! And while we may dream of such a miracle happening we hardly imagine that mere mortals actually become Olympic riders. And yet: they do! Allison Brock lived that dream – and is perhaps still caught up in the whirl wind (and new reality) of being Allison-Brock-the-Olympic-Medalist. Winning an Olympic medal has catapulted her from being a well-known rider on the international dressage scene to being an equestrian celebrity.

So what makes an equestrian athlete?

When asked about her career as a rider Allison often talks about her luck in finding the right teachers at the right time who believed in her and helped her furthered her education. Everything fell into place for her just so. But in speaking with Allison one quickly realizes that paving the way for luck is a very determined, tenacious and focused athlete. A really great athlete is always improving and fine tuning his/her skill set. Allison goes about doing that by constantly critically assessing both her physical and mental strengths and weaknesses and then systematically doing whatever it take to become better.

Anyone who has seen Allison ride can easily attest to the fact that she is a beautiful and effective rider. But behind her physical fitness also lies a very strong mental game. How did Allison come to realize the importance of the mental part of riding and competing? “When I worked for Sue Blinks I was introduced to visualization. Sue did a lot of that – and it seemed to work so I started incorporating visualization into my preparation for showing.” Finding that

focusing on the mental part of riding was helpful, Allison continued with this practice. She has worked with a sports psychologist since 2010.

By now Allison has a very detailed and precise process of visualization in place. “At first this took more work, but just like any muscle gets stronger with work so has my visualization muscle. By now I am pretty good at it.”

Allison goes through several steps in her “mental practice”:

1. First she learns the test she is going to ride really well! “I go over the tests until I practically know them in my sleep. Once I feel that I am proficient at that I repeat the test out loud to other people.”
2. Then she visualizes the test. “Every single moment of it, down to exactly how my horses ears may look in each moment of the test.”
3. Once she has visualized the technical parts of the test she puts feelings on top of that. “I ride the test in my mind and really feel every part of it.”
4. Watching other people’s riders as well as visualizing past rides of her own are another part of refining her mental image. In doing so she only watches and visualizes positive riders, never allowing her mind to think about possible mistakes or bad rides.

Interestingly when she first started doing this mental work she would find her heart rate going up much as perhaps it went up in a real show situation. By now, she is able to visualize her rides with a calm heart beat.



Photo by Shannon Brinkman

“I want to be in control of as many aspects of my rides as possible” Allison says. “Once you are at the show there are lots of outside things that can influence your performance, but you can

train yourself to calm yourself down internally. This will in turn help your horse and how well your ride goes. You have to identify the things you can control – and learn to control it! “

Allison’s advice to amateur riders: adopt a practice of visualization. Start with small steps and train your “mental strength muscles” just as you would any other muscle. If you get overwhelmed at the show ask your trainer to get on your horse until you can calm down and take control of how you feel. With time, visualization will become easier and you will find that feeling more in control of your emotions will make you a better rider and competitor.

Of course riding and competing also requires physical fitness. “While eventers and jumpers tend to deal with a lot of injuries from having fallen off horses so many times, I think dressage riders mostly deal with asymmetries” Allison says. She acknowledges that she is no exception. “My right side wants to collapse and my SI joint often hurts. So I stretch before every ride.”

“We (the US Olympic Dressage team) were lucky” Allison notes. We were lucky to work with Andy Thompson, a physiotherapist from the UK, starting last year. Andy came to Rotterdam when we were there and stayed with us in Rio. It only makes sense that equestrians should get the help a physiotherapist; all other athletes have teams of physiotherapists that travel with them to big events.”

Andy Thompson assessed each rider and gave them an individualized program to fix asymmetries and muscular imbalances. “Doing the program he gave me actually doesn’t take that much time and is really helpful, particularly if I do it right before a ride.”

Allison’s advice to amateur riders when it comes to physical fitness?

“It is really important for amateur riders to realize how much they affect the horse. Sometimes riders come to me when I teach clinics and want to work on a particular movement that they are not getting with their horse but we end up working on their position first... and then often the movement comes easily once they are in a better position.” Allison encourages riders to take a good look at themselves whenever they think the horse is not doing what they think it should. Perhaps the horse is reacting to their asymmetries. “As riders we have to take responsibility and fix these issues.”

What sport (other than riding) would Allison participate in if she had the time?

“Swimming” she smiles! “I love swimming and would recommend it to all riders.”

What advice would Allison give a younger version of herself if she could go back in time?

“When I was young and rode with my dressage instructor she used to work on my posture a lot. I had a tendency to collapse my right side. Around that time I was offered an opportunity to ride polo horses and thought that would be great fun. My instructor Linda Hosoi advised me against it as she thought it would not help my posture – and perhaps in hindsight she was right – So basically: I wish I would have listened to her and worked on myself more as a young kid. And

BTW: I was in Hawaii this year and saw her ride – she still has the most beautiful posture on a horse!”

What was one of the more exciting/amazing ‘things’ about the Olympics?

“We had a great team spirit! I did not expect that it would feel that powerful/awesome to be part of the Olympic team. It is one of the greatest experiences of my life (so far). Walking out into the stadium during the opening ceremonies surrounded by athletes from all over the world was amazing and overwhelming!”

And what is on Allison’s horizon now that the Olympics are behind her?

Rather than resting on her laurels Allison has already set herself specific long and short term goals!