

Eyes on the Prize

by Jessica Wright



“It’s just your mind saying you can’t. Running is 85% mental. Keep going! Focus on your breathing.”

I was a high school senior, and a Marine Corps recruiter had his eye on me. At 6:30am we would run at the school track before class. He wanted me to be a Marine, and he wanted to make sure I was in shape to go to boot camp. I didn’t end up joining, but I am thankful—he taught me valuable lessons! I didn’t believe him at the time; the stitch in my side and the burning in my lungs told me running was most definitely physical, not mental. For some reason, I kept going, despite the stitch, despite the burning. I wish I could tell you I knew he was right and I could push through the resistance by focusing my mind on the goal, but it took a while for that lesson to stick. One day I realized I could run 3 miles without stopping. Soon after that I realized I was also able to concentrate better on tasks like doing economics homework or loading the dishwasher. When I was older, I realized the Marine had taught me mental discipline and focus. This was after I had married a different Marine, who is a world champion horse trainer. For years he has helped me ride and show cow horses. Now I know without a doubt what the first Marine said applies here, too. It’s 85% mental.

The Bible says, “Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one receives the prize? So run that you may obtain it” (1 Corinthians 9:24). If you are going to do something, why not do it in such a way that you are in a position to win the prize? This Scripture isn’t advocating a Ricky Bobby attitude. It simply means don’t run in vain. Run knowing which direction you are running.

Run focused on the outcome instead of all the things that can go wrong or feel uncomfortable. Regardless of circumstances, if you are running to win, the satisfaction is greater. This lesson has served me well in horse showing. Riding horses is this strange mix between being perfectly present in the moment while holding an overall vision and direction that drives each action. This may seem radical, but it is impossible to be at peace in the moment without having the right sense of direction. If we go into the show pen focused on all the things that could go wrong or what our horses are doing wrong at that moment, it'll be a disaster. Do you really know what it means to “keep your eye on the prize,” as the Bible says? I mean do you know it down in your heart? Only when you can keep your eye on the prize can you be free enough from fear and doubt to go perform moment by moment as a partner with your horse. If you are running for the right prize, you will have the winning direction. If you allow God to help you focus on your purpose even when uncomfortable, you will have what it takes to make it. This is where we remember the mental aspect. Just as I learned that the correct focus can overcome side cramps and labored breathing, so it can overcome all fear and trepidation we feel when we attempt to do something complicated and beautiful.

Next time you go riding, take a moment before beginning to get a vision of where you want to go (your prize). Define your direction. Your brain is wired in such a way that it loves when you give it a task to complete. For example, you could define your direction this way: “I intend to communicate with my horse and be polite with him, and I intend to remember my pattern and make correct maneuvers.” Be specific and positive when defining. Notice I said “make correct maneuvers,” not “avoid penalties.” Remember the Scripture—we must run towards a goal. If I say “avoid penalties,” that means I am running away from something. Turn it around and make it positive. You will find if you have this mental focus before your ride, you can stay focused on your prize even if things don't go exactly as planned. When you are heading in the right direction, you eventually reach your destination! God bless and happy riding.