



AN EQUESTRIAN'S DILEMMA

As a psychotherapist back in Amherst, NY, I gained a reputation over my 40 plus years in practice of being successful in helping athletes to become successful in their sports mainly by word of mouth. I started by working with amateur figure skaters at the request of my daughter's figure skating coach. Gradually, the circle grew to include many other sport representations. Among them were swimmers, divers, track and field, some professional figure skaters, Olympic skiers, gymnasts and a group of Buffalo Sabres NHL hockey team members. My work with these athletes centered around helping them to focus through various methods that I devised both individually and in groups. All of them had performance problems of various types preventing them from reaching their potential and excelling in their sports.

One day, I received a call from a young lady in her early 20's...let's call her Linda...asking to see me in order to improve her performance as an equestrian. Now, I knew nothing about competitive riding but I agreed to see her at least once to determine whether I could be of help. Upon asking how she found me, she replied that she was referred "by a friend of a friend".

Linda came to my office shortly thereafter and I met a very attractive, slightly built young woman who was very perplexed. I asked her to describe the problem for which she was seeking help and she simply said "I'm not winning in competitions anymore." Since riding competitively, she was accustomed to placing in the top three but for about the last eight months, her ranking dropped significantly. She only wanted to enter major events throughout the region and it seemed to her that the more prestigious the event, the more problems she encountered.

She went on to say that she had been riding since she was seven or eight years of age and loved being around horses. In order to pay for the use of horses and lessons, she would work at cleaning stables, grooming the horses, etc. She lived in rural area outside of the City but did not own her own horse. She had been taking riding lessons from the same coach for many years and was questioning whether her problem related to the possibility of needing someone new who might be able to change her losing streak. She was reluctant to change, however, because her coach also owned the stables in which the horse that she preferred to ride was stabled and she did not want to lose that privilege.

I asked Linda to share her personal history with me in order that I might come to know her better. She indicated that she came from a very loving family composed of her parents and five girls with her being the youngest. Three of her older siblings had all ridden competitively but she was the only one who had “stuck it out” to continue riding into her twenties. She had always aspired to “being the best” at whatever she did and when I asked what that really meant she replied “I guess that I’m a perfectionist”. She said that as a child she couldn’t tolerate making mistakes and would often tear up homework papers rather than correct them in order to present a “perfect paper” to her teachers.

We pursued that point a bit more in my asking how that feature affected her performance in all areas of her life. Her academic record demonstrated an above average student but there was a price to be paid. When very young, she was told by a teacher that she took things too seriously and she indicated that her parents were concerned as well. When she was about sixteen, she was diagnosed with an ulcer which had since healed but, she pointed out, that told her that her stress level was very high. She tried reducing it in her personal life but realized that her riding demanded a great deal of her and the stress levels were very high...especially in the advanced events that she chose to enter.

I asked her what she felt the problem was that wasn’t allowing her to place in competitions to which she replied that she thought it was her anxiety. She described her anxiety level as always having been quite high but over the years she believed that this served her well in achieving success in many different life circumstances and events. What she couldn’t understand was why her anxiety was interfering in her achieving her goal of winning competitions. As an aside, I asked her about her relationship to her older

siblings and she told me that they were all very gifted women and that he looked up to them a great deal. I asked whether she ever felt that she was in competition with any of them and after some thought admitted that she often felt that she had to prove herself to her parents in light of her siblings' achievements and that was often very hard to do.

I told Linda that I believed I could help her and offered to see her on a weekly basis but that we would assess her progress together as we proceeded and that progress would not just depend on talking about issues but, more importantly, be based on actual experiences that would demonstrate positive changes. The basis for all of my work with athletes is based on DOING, not talking. I asked what she believed her first attention in resolving her problem to which she quickly replied that she needed to change her attitude about needing to be perfect. I agreed that this issue was probably the basis of the problem. I asked her to instruct me in detail about the sport of competition in her sport in order that I might familiarize myself with the important points that I would use with her in her training. Interestingly, I found that many of the points she described in terms of the stressors found in her sport were akin to those in the sport of figure skating with the most outstanding similarity being the scrutiny of the judges.

We started by my training Linda in a basic but intense relaxation technique I call the Focal Stare Method. I had developed a number of relaxation methods but this seemed to be the one that was most effective for athletes. It took a few weeks for her to become familiar with employing the steps required but I reinforced her ability to achieve a very relaxed state to the point of her being able to achieve that state of mind within a matter of seconds simply by recalling the feeling she had when experiencing it. This took consistent practice of up to three to five times a day. I wanted her to learn the method on her own without the use of the CD that I had given her so that she could create her own sense of being relaxed instead of depending on me or the CD with my voice guiding her.

An essential part of the relaxation training exercise was the use of visualization and imagery which she would later use to prepare for all practice sessions and actual competitions. She was an ardent learner and would comply with my direction without question. Her sense of trust was not really of me but of herself in being able to change the pattern that was giving her the problem. She was intent. We started by helping her to

visualize making a mistake in her life and accepting that as being part of being human.

We started with very simple ones that she would entertain in her mind while in a relaxed state and then we gradually moved into more serious mistakes that she might make. This was difficult for her to achieve but she remained faithful to practicing that imagery and, later on, of being able to put her making mistakes in real life into a different and more tolerant perspective. We purposely avoided asking her to visualize making mistakes while competing for a simple reason and the reason is this. In my work with athletes, it is clear that more often than not, there is what I call a “carryover effect” that helps explain the problems that might be experienced while in the course of playing a sport. That carryover affect can vary with each athlete but if an athlete is experiencing a problem in dealing with some life management issues, the probability of that problem manifesting itself in their athletic endeavor is very great. And so, the more an athlete can concentrate on how they are dealing with their lives in a balanced fashion, the greater chance that they will bring that same sense of balance into their performance.

The result of these exercises was very interesting to observe in that she appeared to enjoy not having to “punish herself” as she once did for making mistakes. More importantly, I was training her to learn “rebounding” in her competing because when she would make a mistake; her anxiety level would increase to the point of not being able to move right back into the required program resulting in her standing in the competition being negatively affected.

When I asked Linda to help me gain as much of an understanding of what the experience of riding in a competitive event was about, she responded with a detailed description of the various events, jumps, etc. She explained the scoring system that the judges used in determining what place riders would be placed based on the merits of their performance. I then asked her about the emotions that she experienced before, during and after an event. Of course, for me, this was the most telling of all the descriptions that she gave.

Upon traveling to an event she went through a specific, exhaustive and rigorous routine in preparation for her part in the competition. She indicated that she felt fine up until the practice sessions where she was to familiarize

herself with the course. It was at that point that her adrenaline began to increase flow and her anxiety level would take a dramatic jump. When asked what she was thinking previous to this occurring, he responded that of late she began comparing the event in question to others in which she competed but with emphasis on the negatives that she may have experienced in the past.

I think that I surprised her by asking how the horse felt. She thought for a moment as if trying to place herself inside the horse's thoughts and feelings and slowly began to depict a jitteriness that seemed to overcome the horse. As she went onto describe her sense of the horse's demeanor she began drawing a connection between her own anxiety level and the horse's response in kind.

A Brief Biographical Sketch

After an over 40 year career as a professional psychotherapist and Director of The Sports Stress Clinic in Amherst, NY, Charles Bonasera came to Florida and decided to use the benefits of his previous professional experiences in his new roles of Consultant in Life Management and Business Coaching as well as his expertise as a Motivational Speaker. He once again became involved with athletes in different sports training them with his techniques to help them develop and maintain focus as well as staying in their zone. Much of his training methods are derived from the CD collection he developed under the heading of WIN-WIN SECRETS as the President of Personal Identity Controls. This collection consists of thirty-six programs dealing with vital issues in the management of stress.

Another role that he adopted to add to his professional career was that of Author. Early in the 1980's he wrote Guide to a Life Management Process which he has re-written as a workbook to successfully help people manage their stress which includes his own Working Model. As a result in his interest in golf and realizing that it was essentially a "mind game", he wrote The Mental Side of Golf which can benefit the beginner as well as professionals playing the game of golf.

He then compiled over five-hundred sayings that he had developed in the course of his professional career as stimuli to help people change patterns in their lives entitled How to Stay Well and Live Life to the Fullest. This was followed by a book documenting case studies around disruptive life patterns including ways to change them under the name of How in the Hell Did This Happen to Me? Both his personal involvement in sports as a participant, coach, manager and in his role in officiating, inspired him to write a primer for parents and coaches entitled The Legend of Little League.

Charles invites you to view his website at www.charlesmbonasera.com as well as to write with your comments and questions to his e-mail address (charles@charlesmbonasera.com). He would also be very happy to communicate with his readers by telephone should they desire. His professional motto is “seeking alternative methods to happiness” and wishes those touched by his words to practice the three secrets to a happy life: “enjoy life and enjoy it thoroughly ... develop and maintain a sense of humor ... bring as much love into your life as possible.