

Why do we

Competing takes time, money, effort — and sometimes a 3am alarm. So, what keeps us coming back? **Catherine Welton** explores how understanding your own reasons for competing can help you get more from every outing, stay motivated and, most importantly, keep it fun



do it?



IT'S 5AM ON a Saturday and after scrubbing poo stains the size of Africa off your horse and fixing their plaits, you set off on a two-hour lorry journey, bound for the competition you entered weeks ago.

After enduring the warm-up, you'll have just a few minutes to show off what you and your horse can do in the dressage arena, showing class or jumping round. Then it's time to pack up and go home again — sometimes with a shiny new rosette hanging on the dash, other times lamenting what you could have done differently. Sound familiar? If you ever find yourself asking, "Why do I do it?" — you're not alone.

According to confidence coach Alex Fleming, understanding our own personal motivations for competing is key to enjoying the experience.

"People are motivated differently; for some it's about putting their training into practice, for others it's socialising, and some people are motivated by gaining qualifications, as it gives them a goal to work towards," she explains. "Ask yourself what do I enjoy? Then bring more of that into competition."

Turn scores into progress

Joanna Collins, 59, hails from Pembrokeshire and competes her seven-year-old Welsh section D cob at prelim dressage level and in 70-80cm showjumping classes. She competes to track their progress.

"I really love competing as the result or the dressage score gives me good feedback," she says. "I compare my results against myself and others who also ride at my level — especially if there is a rider that keeps beating me. I want to improve to beat them the next time. I don't openly admit this to anyone, other than my husband!"

Devon teenager Kelly Knockaert, 15, also views competing as a way to get helpful feedback. This is her third British Eventing season and she completed Badminton Grassroots aboard Piper, her 16-year-old cob/Warmblood, last year.

"I think that competitions can help you assess what is and isn't effective in your training and what you can alter. Then at the next competition you can assess whether you've improved," says Kelly, who adds that she is careful not to get too hung up on the result itself.

"You could win one event and then come last at the next one, because every event is different, but that doesn't mean you're regressing."

Celebrate the little wins

Heather Wyles, from Leicestershire, originally bought her horse Tilly as a youngster to produce and sell on. She points out that the wins don't just come in the form of rosettes and trophies.

"I love the little wins," she says. "Taking a young horse to their first show, staying inside the dressage boards — I love doing all the firsts."

And there's another big motivating factor for Heather, too. "I love the social side. When we go to championships, we set up base camp with the gazebo in the middle of all the lorries and make a full weekend of it."

As well as keeping track of training in the saddle, competing can help motivate us in our own personal goals too. At 64, Sue Murphy is a regular on the British Dressage circuit and has qualified for the Area Festivals.

"I have a number of health issues, and I need to keep active to reduce muscle wastage and weakening bones," she explains. "I do feel that competing keeps me and my horses fitter, stronger and more supple. I know I am fortunate as I have friends who have had to stop riding for various reasons — I just want to carry on as long as I can."

When motivation fades

No matter how much they enjoy competing, most riders will lack motivation at some point. When that happens, Alex has the following advice to consider.

"Motivation is an emotion, like happiness. You get happiness through the things you're doing, and it's the same with motivation — you feel motivated after you've done the thing, rather than the other way around," she says.

"Just start with a hack and because of the action, the motivation will come back. It's how the dopamine pathways in your brain work. Once you get started on a task, it initiates the dopamine rewards."

It's important to listen to what your body is telling you, too, adds Alex.

"For some riders, you might be completely exhausted. Burnout is common, which can cause a lack of motivation. It's worth considering, am I asking a lot of myself? Perhaps riding before work, doing a full day's work, looking after family — you might just be tired.

"Build rest and recovery time into the plan, be aware of having a little bit of time out, even half a day, especially if competitions have become a source of stress."

"People are motivated differently... Health, work, family, having children, often changes your perspective" — Alex Fleming

CHECK-IN WITH YOURSELF REGULARLY

Once you've identified your own motivation for competing, it's important to check-in on yourself regularly as that motivation may change over time.

Alex says: "Health, work, family, having children, often changes your perspective.

If you don't do that check-in, you can end up comparing yourself. For example, rather than asking yourself what other people do after they've had children, you need to ask, 'what feels right for me?'"



Life changes, as do motivations

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For some riders, it's the social side of competing that they enjoy

Find what matters

Sometimes the motivation to compete comes from a passion for a particular breed of horse. For Rebecca Sumner in Derbyshire, that breed is the Thoroughbred, and she competes to raise awareness of their versatility.

"If I can help change just one person's perception of former racehorses by showing what they can achieve after racing, then every mile travelled and every early morning has been worth it," she says.

Bridget Stein returned to riding aged 50. She says her reasons for competing — she contests TREC on her 14.1 Welsh section D, Neco — have changed this time around.

"I used to be competitive and of course I still enjoy getting good scores, but recently I have started valuing the companionship and connection with my pony through an event more than the rosette colour at the end," explains Bridget. "The long rides in different parts of the country are fun, and



Joanna Collins competes to push herself to improve



Kelly Knockaert values the feedback she receives from competing



Bridget Stein enjoys the strong bond competitions build



Heather Wyles enjoys the "little wins" of achievement as well as the social side



Sue Murphy finds having competition goals keeps her and her horses fitter and stronger

the obstacle phase is challenging. I also relish camping next to my pony and just chilling out in the peaceful and beautiful rural places where the events are usually held."

Bridget is mindful of making sure competing stays fun.

"When my pony or I are not enjoying it, I just stop for a while until I feel enthusiastic again. These periods are also useful times to put back into the sport as an organiser, route planner or helper."

Keep sight of the why

Ultimately, there is so much to be gained from competing and so many different reasons why people do it. Taking the time to connect with your own personal motivation means you'll really make the most of each experience. As Kelly points out, that's what makes the hard work worth it.

"Occasionally I've questioned why I do it all, the 3am starts, the five-hour journeys, but thinking about not doing it makes me realise how much I really do love it and that it's so worth it," she says. "Once you've got the eventing bug, you can't stop!"

EYES ON THE PRIZE

Rosettes, trophies and photos are an important reminder of what you've achieved with your horse and it's good to put them on display, Alex says. "They're worth putting front and centre;

the more your environment supports the version of you that you would like to be, the more your brain filters your reality to that exact thing. It's the science of affirmations," she explains.



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THE KEY IS TO ASK YOURSELF THE RIGHT QUESTIONS

To help riders understand their own individual motivations for competing, Alex suggests the following checklist of questions to ask yourself:

■ If nobody was watching, what would I want from today?

■ What would make today feel more successful for me?

■ Am I chasing my own goals or somebody else's?

■ What am I making today's result mean about me?

■ What would I like to remember about today a week from now?

■ What could I do to make today 10% more enjoyable for me as an individual?

■ Why do I compete? 🐾

If you lose motivation, don't panic. Your motivation for competing may change over time



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