

Finding "flow" in 6 a.m. training rides

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Monday, 08 June 2009

The end of last week and this weekend were non-riding (and non-computer) weekends for me. Apologies to the new AmateurDressage.com members who had to wait a couple of days to have accounts verified.

In any event, in keeping with my attempt to start a training journal, I did do some general reading while horseless that I think relates to riding. I am about one-third of the way through *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience* (P.S.) , a book by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi. Csikszentmihalyi is a psychologist who writes about positive psychology and creativity and I've run across his name in some other readings lately. So, I thought it would be interesting to read this book. Csikszentmihalyi is most well known for his theory of "flow" described in the Wikipedia article about him (linked above) as: "a state of concentration or complete absorption with the activity at hand and the situation. The idea of flow is identical to the feeling of being in the zone or in the groove."

Obviously there are lots of implications for riding and training. Csikszentmihalyi's discussion of "flow" explains that while in a state of "flow" performance can seem effortless, and yet to achieve the skill required to achieve flow takes, to paraphrase, a lot of blood, sweat, and tears. Sounds pretty familiar and also serves to remind this amateur rider that to stretch one's boundaries is not always comfortable or easy. He explains that experiences where we stretch past our comfort zone to achieve something worthwhile are "not necessarily pleasant at the time they occur" (page 3). He goes on to describe the physical discomfort of training, including tired and aching muscles and fatigue that often accompany athletic training. And still, the enjoyment these moments allow us (after we've recuperated and applied Ben Gay, I guess?!) are far greater than the "passive, receptive, relaxing times" that are also enjoyable.

So, for this amateur rider who's about to change her ride times to the early, early morning (gulp), I'm trying to remember Csikszentmihalyi theory. It would be really easy to keep my regular after work ride time, not change things and accept the general status quo of my routine. But, I'm going to take a chance that Csikszentmihalyi might be onto something when he writes "The best moments usually occur when a person's body or mind is stretched to its limits in a voluntary effort to accomplish something difficult and worthwhile. Optimal experience is thus something that we make happen" (page 3).

There are lots of connections that one could make with Csikszentmihalyi's theory of flow and general learning theory but I'll leave those for another post (or maybe just leave them altogether). I'll report back soon about the joys of riding before the sun rises and also as I finish up the Csikszentmihalyi book.

Happy riding everyone!