

Celebrate Your Success

By Stacy Westfall

*How small achievements
lead to grand goals.*

AS I WRITE THIS ARTICLE, I AM SITTING IN MY pickup at a horse show. I have just finished coaching four riders through patterns. Two of them were showing for the first time. Nerves were running high, and hopes even higher.

As they waited for their turn to compete, I could almost hear their thoughts, “How will my horse behave? Will I remember the pattern? How many people will be watching?” One confided in me that her worst fear was falling off in the show pen.

While I may not have known what they were, I’m sure each of my four students had a goal or expectation in mind. I preach the importance of goals all the time. (See the February-March issue of *America’s Horse*.) And so I think it’s important that I also stress that celebrating small successes on the way to more difficult goals is one of the things that makes achieving that distant goal possible.

I’ve noticed that some people set goals, pretty lofty ones even, and then never celebrate or take satisfaction in the smaller steps of improvement that occur before that goal is reached. This is a recipe for burnout or surrender – especially if you set your goals far beyond your present comfort zone. If you don’t pay attention to the fact that you’re closing in on that goal each time you take a step forward, the journey to the goal can begin to feel thankless.

It’s hard enough to stick with a challenging goal and the one-step-forward two-steps-back times when you seem to be making no progress. Because we all know that improvement is almost never smooth and steady; it comes with setbacks and periods of snail-pace progress.

That’s when celebrating small successes can mean the difference between giving up, joylessly dogging on or happily continuing forward, knowing you’re making progress you feel good about.

Consider this scenario: Two recreational riders decide to begin competing in the show ring. They both have a goal that they would like to place first in a class by the end of the

show season. At the first show, Rider One has set “mini goals” for herself – she’s not going to fall off, she’s not going to finish last and she’s not going to forget the pattern. Rider Two is thinking only about coming in first.

During her run, Rider One stays on her horse but in her excitement, she skips a maneuver. The judges place her eighth in a class of 11. Rider Two ran the entire pattern correctly and placed sixth in the class.

In the barn after the show, Rider One has a smile on her face. She hasn’t given up on her first-place goal, but she has some successes to celebrate – she stayed on, and she didn’t finish at the bottom of the class, two little steps in the journey toward that first-place finish she’s pursuing. She knows what she has to fix, and her mini goals for her next show will be a little more demanding.

Rider Two is in the dumps. Having failed to set some smaller goals for herself, she’s taking no joy in the fact that she ran her pattern with no mistakes. What stands out in her mind is the distance from sixth to first, and the hard work it will take to get there.

For her, there are no successes – and therefore no celebrating or joy to be had from the show.

You can see where this will go if they both continue along in these frames of mind for the rest of the show season. Rider One will continue to set small goals for herself that will draw her ever closer to her major goal. She’ll enjoy most of her experiences because she’s noticing what she’s doing right, not just that she hasn’t yet taken a first place. Rider Two may become discouraged, lose heart and wonder why she ever wanted to compete in the first place if it’s so disappointing and thankless.

I’d put my money on Rider One reaching the goal of a first-place finish before Rider Two – even though at their first show, Rider Two finished two places ahead of Rider One. And here’s why: You are going to reach your major goals faster when you celebrate all the small successes along the way. The joy you get from the celebrating gets you over the

humps of the setbacks. Your practices become hopeful because you know the pleasure you get from each small achievement in the show ring.

So go ahead and set your goals high – the higher the better. But remember to watch yourself along the way and notice what you're doing right. Identify smaller, incremental goals so you're setting yourself up for successes to celebrate. Before you know it, you'll have reached that major goal – and you'll have enjoyed the journey. 🐾

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