

Get set, goal

Our expert



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Looking to make the 2020 season a success? Sally McGinn explains how effective goal-setting is key

As spring moves into summer and the days get longer, now's the perfect time to reflect on lessons learnt from the winter and consider your training and competition aims for 2020. By giving yourself a clear focus, you'll find it easier to manage and keep track of your progress. Whether you're aiming for your first ever dressage test or stepping up to Discovery, setting your own, achievable goals allows you to stay in control of the season ahead. Here's how to get started. ➤

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Set up for success

Take a moment to consider your needs and aspirations, and really get to the bottom of what you want to achieve. By setting your own goals, you're far more likely to succeed because they'll be tailored and targeted to you. These types of goals are much more motivating than those created by someone else that you may not feel so invested in.

When setting goals, consider...

- the **challenge** they'll give you. It's a fine balance between having goals that improve your riding and push you a little out of your comfort zone, and ensuring they're achievable and realistic
- being **specific** about what you're trying to accomplish
- how you're going to **measure** achievement against your goals – you need to know that you're moving in the right direction
- using goals to **problem-solve** specific areas. For example, if your horse refuses to jump into water, consider breaking the problem down into several small goals. Splitting the problem in this way is great for tracking your progression, which will gradually boost your confidence



TOP TIP

Work with your instructor to develop realistic goals. They can provide a useful outside eye as well as being able to break down your goals into achievable exercises.

Make it personal

When setting goals for the season ahead, it's important to not only consider what you'd like to achieve in the saddle, but what you can do on the ground to help, too. Take some time to consider what you do outside riding and how it might affect what you do with your horse.

There are different aspects that make us up as people, and all of them need considering before you start setting goals...

- physical fitness
- technical skill
- lifestyle – such as diet and sleeping patterns
- social support – whether that's family, friends or coaches
- mental fitness

These factors work together as a jigsaw puzzle. All these pieces need to fit together with everything in place, so there's nothing interfering with your focus or concentration when you ride. Reflect on the jigsaw puzzle and see if there are areas you need to spend some time on. This can help you manage any distractions from different parts of your life.

Think about changes you need to make and set some targets accordingly. You may hope to improve your physical fitness or want to look at nutrition or sleep quality. Whichever area you want to focus on, give yourself some measurable aims that will help you accomplish what you want to achieve. You'll need to think about the resources you need or the people around you that can help, too. ➔



The big three

To set yourself up for success, you'll also need to consider the type of goals you're setting.

Goals can be split into three categories...

- 1. Outcome goals** require you to define the result you want to achieve – a win or achieving a certain dressage score. Be careful with these goals because, while they may feel like the long-term aspirations for you and your horse, you can't control their outcomes. For instance, dressage tests are marked by a judge whose decisions you have no control over, and your results come down to who you compete against on the day.
- 2. Performance goals** involve improving your personal bests. Consider achieving the optimum time on a cross-country course or producing a more consistent canter in the showjumping ring.
- 3. Process goals** are the technical skills and aspects of riding that help you achieve your performance goals. Examples of process goals could be working on a warm-up routine, improving how you plan your competition days, getting in the school four days a week or working on visualisation.

These goals shouldn't be solely for competition days, you should set some for training sessions, too. I often say "practice with a purpose". What are you trying to achieve each time you school or have a lesson? Be sure to evaluate how these training sessions will help you achieve your goals.

Be specific each time you ride, even if your goal is to hack and enjoy the company of friends – that's just as important for your wellbeing and confidence as working on specific skills. Consider entering lower level competitions that allow you to practise certain aspects of your riding in a competitive environment. It takes away some of the pressure and allows you to consider whether you've achieved what you wanted, if there's still some work to do or if you need to adjust your goals.



TOP TIP

Try to focus on performance and process goals. While outcome goals can be useful, they're often out of your control, which makes them a difficult way to measure progress.



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Written up

Once you know what your goals are, write them down. This doesn't mean they're set in stone, but it allows you to keep looking at them, reviewing them, adapting them and reflecting on your progress. You can see the changes you've made and, most importantly, what you've achieved. We know with horses that plan A will go through many iterations before we get where we want to be. Be flexible with your goals so you're still achieving while being realistic. ■