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CENTERED *Riding*

By Heidi Potter

Centered Riding exercises start on the ground, and then are transitioned to horseback. If you are holding tension anywhere in your body you cannot function properly, nor can your horse.

TIPS and
TECHNIQUES
for all disciplines.

A BALANCED and centered body is vital to good riding. Developed by Sally Swift, Centered Riding® (CR) helps riders at all levels and of all disciplines achieve harmony and balance by using their bodies correctly and more effectively.

These methods are primarily based on philosophies found in martial arts as well as the Alexander Technique, which addresses a person's posture and movement. Through application of CR basics, along with grounding, body awareness and clear intent, a rider can improve her overall comfort, confidence and communication with her horse. The result is a horse that is more responsive, balanced and relaxed. All these applications help free up the horse, regardless of his job, allowing for the best possible interaction and performance.

Centered Riding basics

- Soft eyes – Improve the rider's visual and physical awareness, relaxation and sense of "feel".
- Breathing – Diaphragmatic breathing improves the rider's posture, releases tension and opens the way for clear communication.
- Balance or building blocks – Aligns the rider's body for improved balance, position, comfort and ease of movement.
- Centering – Use of the center to improve balance, stability, movement and control, in an easy and quiet manner.

To these basics we add *clear intent* for communicating our intentions with quieter physical aids; and *grounding* for improved security and balance for both horse and rider. The end result is a safer and more enjoyable partnership with your horse.

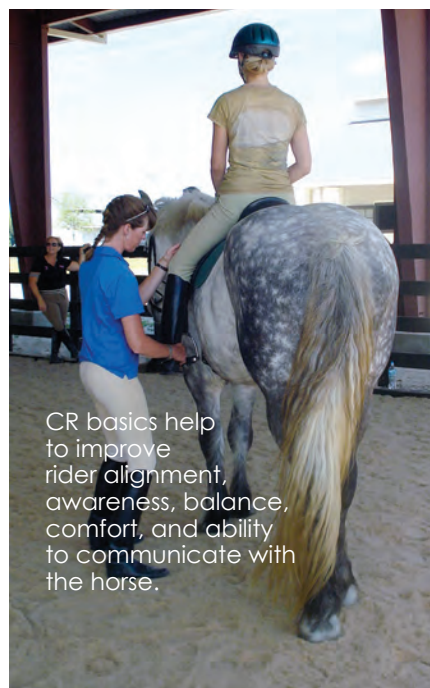
Walk before you run

CR open clinics are designed for riders of all levels and disciplines, and all breeds of horses. Mornings are generally spent off the horse, learning and experimenting with CR basics. The exercises are fun and informative, often involving a human "horse" partner. Here, the horse is given a voice in order to better teach the human.

The afternoon sessions are reserved for application under saddle, with participants riding in small groups. Practice and application of CR basics begin simply at the walk. "If you can't get it at the walk, then why progress to the trot?" says Sally Swift. Therefore, much work is done at slower gaits in the beginning, giving riders the chance to really experiment and feel the changes in their own bodies and that of their horses. These changes, which often seem subtle to the humans, can be huge to the horses. This is very exciting to observe and experience!

Give it a try!

Through performing CR exercises, riders also learn valuable lessons in body awareness and how they affect their horses' performance and behavior. The rider leaves with a much clearer understanding of why her horse does what he does and how to best support him.



CR basics help to improve rider alignment, awareness, balance, comfort, and ability to communicate with the horse.

“The essence of CR is that our minds must become conscious of our bodies,” says Sally Swift. “The basics are your tools. Go lightly and with pleasure through life. This can be power. This can give enormous energy and hope.”


Many of the exercises in self-awareness can be applied and practiced by the participant during normal daily routines. This offers riders a chance to actually improve their riding and communication while off the horse.

Here is an example of an exercise often taught at CR clinics. Go ahead and give it a try as you sit and read this article:

- ① Sit up tall, arch your back, tense your shoulders and squeeze your “reins”.
- ② Now take a big, deep, diaphragmatic breath.

Whoops! Notice how you are unable to do this? Your breath gets trapped in your upper chest with nowhere to go. Whenever there is tension anywhere in your body, you will be unable to breathe correctly. You can even try just gripping the floor with your toes and taking a deep breath. You will again find that your breath will be shallow. In the saddle you will be unable to relax, connect with your seat, follow your horse’s movement, or send a soft feel through the reins. If you are holding tension anywhere in your body you cannot function properly, nor can your horse. Now try this:

- ① Sit tall again by growing upward, without tensing any muscles. Imagine a string attached to the top, back part of your head, pulling you up.
- ② Relax your shoulders and your back. Take a big, deep diaphragmatic breath. Upon exhaling, allow your body to settle down and relax. Keep your upper torso open and tall. You will feel a melting of your body into your seat. Your lower back will soften and lengthen, allowing your pelvis to drop back into what I refer to as neutral. In this position, your seat will be able to freely follow the horse’s movement, which he will love and appreciate. Your entire upper body will respond with relaxation and your legs will feel long and heavy. You will discover a connected “heaviness” that allows you to communicate your intentions in a more safe, subtle, clear and efficient manner.

Such seemingly small things can make a huge difference in your riding and with your horse. By increasing your self-awareness through the use of Centered Riding techniques, you will find improved balance, comfort, confidence and communication with your horse. His job will become easier and he will truly appreciate the change! 

Heidi Potter is a Certified Level III Centered Riding Clinician, specializing in combining CR principals with Natural Horsemanship training techniques to create safe, enjoyable and trusting relationships. Heidi has studied under Sally Swift, the founder of Centered Riding, as well as with several other Level IV Centered Riding Instructors and natural style trainers. She offers riding instruction, training, and a wide variety of clinics across the country and at her facility in Southern Vermont, The New England Center for Horsemanship. For more information visit heidipotter.com or centeredriding.org.

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