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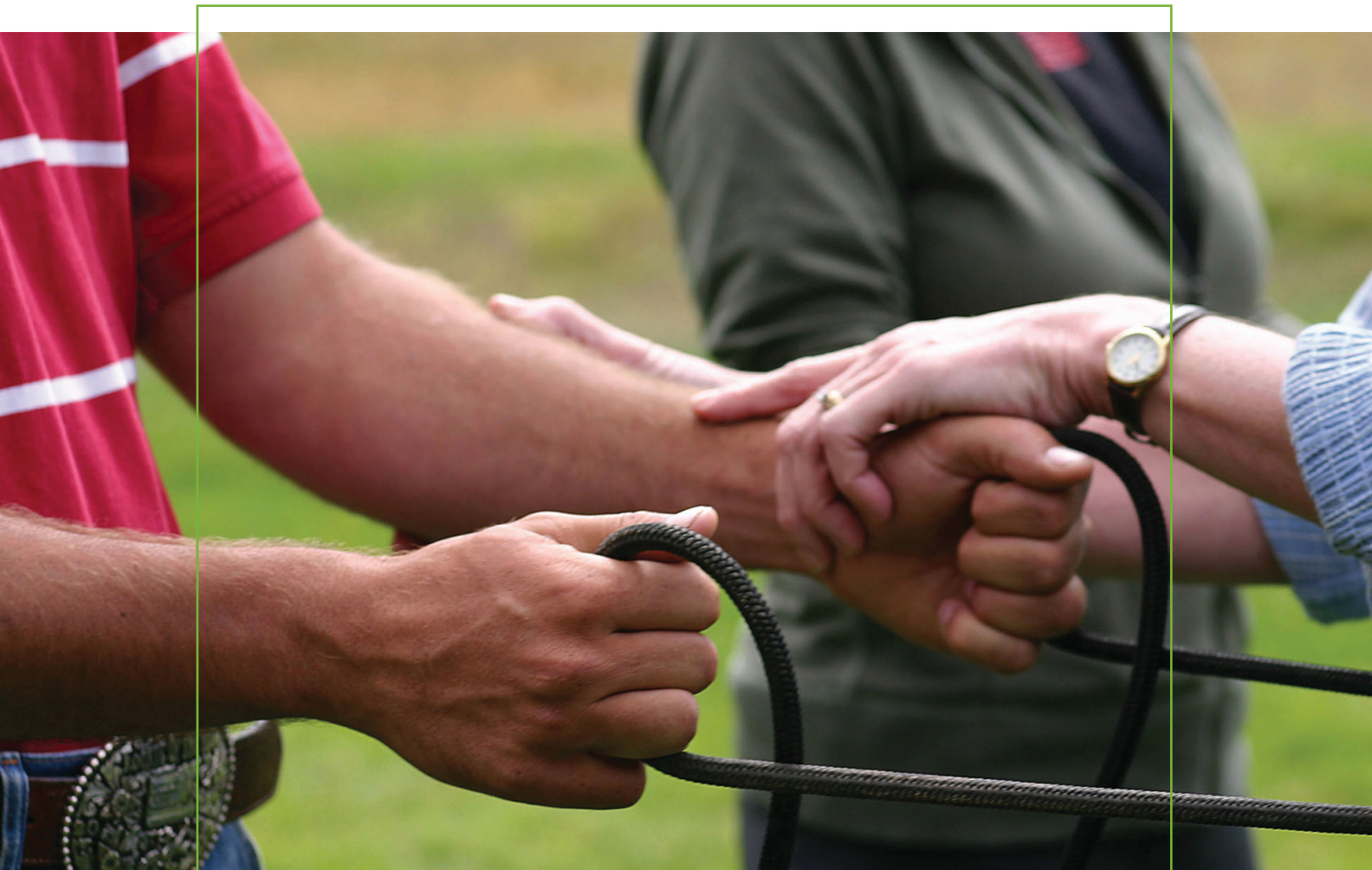
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IMPROVING

feel and connection with

Centered Riding Basics



By Heidi Potter, Certified Centered Riding Clinician

As riders, our goal is to ride in lightness and harmony with our horses, sharing in balance and movement. We strive to develop and maintain a connection through our reins that least disturbs the horse's natural ability to do all we ask of him. Sally Swift's Centered Riding Basics of Soft Eyes, Breathing, Centering and Balance all play a role in helping to achieve this soft, clear connection.

*"Your arms and hands, from the shoulder joints to the tips of the fingers
and through the reins, belong to the horse."* - Sally Swift

A CONSISTENT CONNECTION

Pretend you're a horse for a moment. Someone is standing behind you with their fingers in the corners of your mouth; they then ask you to walk, run, jump and climb while they try to keep that connection soft and supportive. Wow! That's hard!

In Centered Riding clinics, we actually simulate this exact idea. One exercise involves the human "horse" holding the bit in her hands and the rider standing opposite her with the reins. This exercise has undoubtedly been one of the most enlightening and often distressing experiences for clinic participants. They learn what it truly feels like to be connected to another living being by a piece of metal, via your "mouth". Each rider's sensitivity, understanding and awareness improve drastically when they can put themselves in the place of the horse.

GOOD HANDS COME FROM AN INDEPENDENT SEAT

Many riders have been taught to control and primarily direct the horse through their hands and reins. However, early lessons should first involve learning about balance, feel and communication through our seat, legs and the use of our energy. Only once we have the ability to ride with an independent seat can we move in true harmony with the horse. Once this is accomplished, the reins are added to create clarity and finesse in communicating our desires to the horse.

Developing a soft, following seat results from riding with relaxed, flexible hips, knees and ankles. Riding well isn't easy, so your first goal should be self-awareness. The best way to become truly aware of your body is to focus on feeling the movement. In order to feel, you must let go of all tensions. This is made much easier on the lead or lunge line. Feel where your body is holding tension and try to breathe into that area. As you exhale imagine a soothing color or warm, soft liquid like molasses traveling down your entire body. Begin at your head and exhale several breaths all the way through your feet to the ground.

Your goal is to develop a seat that is balanced, and able to receive and follow your horse's motion. The hips, knees and ankles must be able to absorb the motion in order to maintain a soft, elastic feel of connection with the horse.

DEVELOPING CORE STRENGTH

We work to keep our horses athletically strong, but often forget about ourselves. Riders need to be committed to their own fitness in order to ride well. There are many exercises and stretches designed for riders that promote flexibility and strength. They will make a big difference in your ability to carry yourself in balance, which is another necessary component of maintaining a soft feel.

HOLDING BABY BIRDS

Sally Swift's image of holding baby birds is a classic for learning how to hold your reins. Don't crush your birds, but don't let them fly away either. In an attempt to be "soft", troubling the horse the least, many riders ride with open fingers and loose reins. This can actually be confusing to the horse as it inhibits the connection from your center, seat and legs, into your hands. This lack of connection can result in the horse not staying on the rail, falling in on the corners, and not being able to maintain a steady rhythm and tempo. A softly closed hand simply serves as a hook for the reins to pass through. This image should help you provide a nice feel and connection with your horse.

ALIGNMENT THROUGH THE WRISTS

When we consider our hands, one basic goal is to create and keep a straight line from the elbow to the bit, following softly with a giving hand. It is important not to bend or break your wrist line while holding the reins. When that occurs, you immediately block and disrupt the flow of energy, breaking the connection with your horse. Imagining that you are wearing a wrist brace (or you can actually do so) will help you remember to maintain that straight line. As your horse raises and lowers his head, your hands simply follow, keeping that straight line.

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Working in pairs, students learn from each other what their horses feel from them.



Photo courtesy of Heidi Potter

Don't "spill your wine"

Keeping your hands in a mostly vertical position is crucial when it comes to following your horse's movement and being able to ride with softness. When you hold your hands horizontally you are physically crossing two bones in your forearm, thus disturbing the connection. This inhibits your ability to maintain a soft, opening elbow, and disturbs the flow of energy that travels from your seat and center through your arms to the horse's mouth.

TRY THIS EXERCISE:

1. Bend your elbows to a 90° angle and hold your closed hands out in front of you. (see pg. 18)
2. With your hands in a vertical (wine holding) position, extend them fully out in front of you and then allow your elbows to return to your sides.
3. Repeat this three times.
4. Next, turn your wrists so that your hands are sitting in a horizontal, "spilling your wine" position.
5. As you repeat the motion three times you will notice that there is a stiffness that travels up your forearms through your elbows to your shoulders. Your elbows can no longer open and close with ease.

BITS AND BRIDLES

When we consider connection and softness through our hands, we need to rule out any issues with the bit. Bits will create either relaxation or resistance in your horse. If you are dealing with a behavior issue such as rooting, head tossing, head shaking, tongue over or out, teeth grinding, and so on, you obviously don't have relaxation. You must first rule out pain, which could be skeletal, muscular or in the mouth itself. It may be necessary to consult a veterinarian, an equine dentist, an equine chiropractor, or all three. Once you have taken pain out of the equation, you must next be sure your horse is comfortable with the bit you have. Try different bits and compare his response to each. It will become clear which ones he prefers, assuming your hands are not the issue. There are also many bitless bridle options that I've had a great deal of success with.




The rider demonstrates the desired straight line of contact using a bitless bridle. This unbroken "telephone" line sends messages from your center and your seat directly through the horse from the back to the front.

RIDE THE BODY, NOT THE MOUTH

Our goal is to ride in harmony with the horse, without impeding his natural movement and balance. I really like reminding my students to imagine they are riding all four feet and the body of the horse. This image can help put their focus on the feel, and not on "steering" the horse through the reins. Riders are often amazed at how responsive and correct horses can become when they make their suggestions through their centers and minds first.

Using Sally Swift's "Barber Pole", referred to as the "swivel", will help you really feel what can be done without your hands. Next time you ride, try setting your reins down (while in a safe, enclosed area) and direct your horse with only your energy, intent and body. Imagine your body as the barber pole that swivels in the direction of "go". Then slightly soften the thigh you are turning towards. Try halting by using only a big, deep, audible exhale and stopping the movement of your seat. This exercise helps bring awareness to riding with your body first, then using your reins to improve balance and communication in a soft, suggestive manner.

REWARDING THE HORSE

Horses learn on the release of the rider's cue. Whenever we set up a question for the horse, it is imperative that we stay focused and present so we can "hear" his answer. Softening your hands, along with whatever other means are cuing him (seat/leg/weight, etc.), will give him the "YES!" answer he seeks. Be mindful about asking slowly and releasing quickly. Your horse will thank you! 

A Centered Riding clinic participant practices riding through her center. This exercise helps riders discover how the use of center, seat, weight and clear intent can direct their horses. It leads to using the body and mind in connection with the reins, rather than just the reins themselves.



Photo courtesy of Amy Barkley-Carey

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Ride the Revolution!

Heidi Potter is an internationally known and respected Trainer, Certified Centered Riding® Clinician, CHA (Certified Horsemanship Association) Master Instructor/Clinician and Accredited Horse Agility Trainer. She teaches a wide variety of training and riding clinics at her Southern Vermont facility, The New England Center for Horsemanship, and abroad. In her new book, *Open Heart, Open Mind – A Pathway to Rediscovering Horsemanship*, Heidi shares the value of mindfulness, understanding and compassion towards horses, thus offering her readers great depth in how best to create a lasting bond with their equine partners. Visit heidipotter.com to order your copy, view a schedule of upcoming events, and learn about hosting your own event.

