

P A R T I

# QUIET HARMONY

BECOME MINDFUL WHEN YOU RIDE

*By getting rid of all the extra “noise” we make  
in the saddle, we can communicate with our partners more clearly.*

BY HEIDI POTTER • PHOTOS BY BETSY LYNCH

ABOUT 10 YEARS AGO, SALLY SWIFT, THE FOUNDER OF CENTERED RIDING™, said something that had a profound effect on just about all of my work with horses. She said that we must focus 75% of our energy on ourselves and only give our horses 25%.

Because horses are prey animals and we are, for the most part, predators, their senses allow them to be much more perceptive than we could ever be. They have an amazing understanding of our emotional, mental, and physical state. They “read” us the entire time we are with them. Therefore, we need to be very aware of what kind of messages we’re sending. Our natural tendency is to be too active and “noisy” with our minds and bodies. Especially when working with horses, we should strive to slow things down, and practice just being “in the moment.”

We can begin by developing greater self-awareness, by becoming “mindful” of our body language, our intonation when we speak, our touch, and our overall demeanor while working with our horses. Actually becoming mindful takes practice, so I’ll share some ideas that you can apply to simple maneuvers with your horse. It’s a first step in the journey to create a more positive, relaxing, and pleasant experience for both of you.

We’ll begin by taking a look at how we cue our horses for specific movements. Then we will see if there might be an easier, less-intrusive way to get the same—or better—results.

I challenge each of you to go out and try these exercises on your own and see what happens. I believe that you will learn, as I have, that these sensitive creatures need so much less cuing than we’re used to doing. If we can be ever more mindful and lighten up our way of asking, we will create a more content and willing partner. And remember that the release and the timing of that release (from any form of pressure) are as critical as the actual cue itself.

## Centering & Breathing

Let’s spend a moment on locating your center and learning about proper breathing. I feel that these two Centered Riding basics are the essence of attaining true mindfulness.

The center is considered the core of your body, your center of energy and control. It is from here that you should initiate every cue to your horse, ensuring mindful communication. This is true whether you’re working from the ground or in the saddle. We know that our thoughts are generated first in our brain. But once you have the thought, you must run it through your center before delivering it to your horse. It is a way of being sure that your body is most clearly relaying your intentions.

With a picture and words, I can describe where and how to use your center for these tasks. However, being able to proficiently access your center and use it to its full potential takes a great deal of practice and possibly a lifetime to master. Training in traditional martial arts, yoga, Pilates, meditation, and other forms of self-awareness will greatly help you understand the power and usefulness of your center.

To be most successful with these tasks, you must also understand correct breathing. To help you visualize the flow of breath, think about filling a drinking glass. When you pour the liquid into the glass, it will fill from the bottom up. Now take a slow (very slow) breath in through your nose and imagine that you are filling your diaphragm first with your breath, just like the liquid filling the glass. When you breathe in, watch your lower stomach expand and begin to fill. Keep it slow and rhythmic. It doesn’t have to be excessively deep. Visualize the glass being emptied as you exhale. It would empty from the top down like your breath emptying from your chest first and then down to the bottom of your stomach. When you see your body responding correctly, you will know that you’ve got it.

Then tie centering and breathing together. Take a deep breath in and feel it reaching down and filling your center. On the inhale, you should feel your body getting a little taller, your shoulders relaxing and your chest slightly opening. When you exhale, you should feel your spine lengthen, the small of your back softly filling and your tailbone dropping slightly under your seat. Now you’re ready to roll!

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## Creating Harmony

- ◆ Learn to locate your center, from which all your riding cues emanate.
- ◆ Practice breathing as though you are filling and emptying a glass.
- ◆ Concentrate on removing the “noise” of an unbalanced seat.
- ◆ Keep your nose in alignment with your shirt buttons and turn from your center.
- ◆ Remember that less is more!







To locate your center, place one hand on your stomach, with your thumb on your navel and your open hand resting below it cupping your tummy. Place your other hand on the small of your back, opposite your front hand. In between your hands lies your center.

### Task: Walk On

Think about how you ask your horse to walk on. As you read this list, please realize that you may not be aware of how many of these cues you normally use. Do you:

- Stiffen or hold your breath when you take up the rein?
- Ask with leg pressure? How much?
- Apply some spur?
- Cluck, kiss, or use your voice?
- Use your voice and your leg?
- Just pull out or back on the rein to move your horse?
- Notice if his head goes up?
- Keep your mind on walking, or is it elsewhere?

Now this is where the mindfulness comes in. Try this:

- Balance yourself and grow tall. Is your body ready to ride?
- Think “walk.” (You might succeed with getting the walk right then—imagine that!)
- What is the slightest amount of leg you could possibly use to get the walk? (Remember, your horse is so sensitive, he can feel a tiny fly on his coat. Was your cue that light?)
- Did you release as soon as he moved off?

### Task: Downward Transition to a Halt

Here’s a great opportunity for self-awareness. Think about how you ask your horse to halt. Do you use:

- Just reins?
- Just seat?
- Just voice?
- All three?
- Did your horse’s head come up?
- Did he brace anywhere?
- Did you unbalance him?

Now you’re ready to do a mindful (and seemingly invisible) halt. This is a great example of how to apply the 75/25 rule. Don’t think about stopping your horse. Instead, think about what you need to do with your body to communicate the halt. Remember to stop cuing as soon as your horse halts. You may get it on the first step. Try this:

- Take a breath in and on the exhale stop your seat from moving.
- You may get it right here as I have (see the photo). Be sure to stop yourself from adding any more cues once your horse has stopped.
- Exhale through your center and send the energy down to the ground through the saddle.
- Remember to stay tall and balanced; don’t collapse your upper body.
- Say “whoa.”
- Close your fingers as slowly as possible and release as quickly as possible, once the halt is completed.



Take a look at Tucker’s expression. We started at a halt. (A more mindful halt would have resulted in Tucker squaring up.) As he transitions into the walk, I’m looking for him to remain calm. If I surprised him with the cue, or asked too loudly, his head would have come up and mostly likely his ears would have come back.





First become aware of how you're riding the walking movement of your horse. Be sure that you are receiving your horse's energy through your center and your seat is following the motion of the walk as you can see here. I have light contact at the walk and an even softer rein as he comes down. There is no pull.

To help ensure a square halt, on the out breath, just "walk" your seat down into the halt in rhythm with the horse's legs. Sink your breath weight into each seat bone until you are both squarely halted.

Look at the pictures of Tucker stepping into the halt as I exhale and slow my seat movement down. His haunches are dropping under and his ears are on me, displaying that the feeling is going through. Also, his expression is still relaxed, so much so that his eyes are almost closing. Notice I have light contact at the walk and an even softer rein as he comes down. There is no pull. As we know, it's not the front end we want to stop, it's the haunches. Therefore, we must disengage our "haunches" to send the correct message, allowing the horse to remain balanced. We can easily do that with the release of a deep breath, relaxing our body and ceasing the motion of our following seat.

This halt will feel like a miracle the first time your horse does this for you—and he will. Go out and play with this. See how good you can both get at stopping with a breath. The breath work also translates into groundwork. At home here, my horses will come down from a canter to a walk, and then a halt, on the longe line or in the round pen, simply by hearing my breath and seeing my body relax.

## Task: Backing Up Your Horse

I'm assuming here that you have started your horse's training on the ground and that backing up, in hand, has been part of his former training. It's also helpful if the horse knows how to get soft up front and give to the bit. However, it's not required for this technique to work. Visualize the steps you use when asking your horse to back. Do you use:

- Just rein?
- Just legs?
- Rein and leg aides combined?
- Any voice?

Next time you ride, try backing your horse through your center with the following steps. It's a real test of mindfulness and patience. The goal is for your horse to be relaxed so he can "hear" you, then to soften and round as he takes his steps backward.

Take up light contact with your reins, and then proceed as follows:

- Picture how the back up will look and feel (head down, neck soft, haunches engaged, alternating legs moving back).
- Balance your own body. (Sit tall, relax your shoulders, relax your lower back and allow your tail bone to drop under. Keep your legs long and resting around the horse's barrel.)

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You can see that Tucker remains relaxed through these steps of backing. More importantly, you should notice that my body position isn't changing. My upper body is tall, my shoulders are relaxed, and my arms have remained bent and hanging at my sides with soft hands. My seat doesn't appear to change and my legs are lightly on.





As we step into a halt here, there is still little sign of change in my body. I have simply stopped my energy flow from spinning backward, which Tucker feels and responds to.

- Breathe into your center and imagine that there is a ball within it.
- On the exhale, imagine spinning the ball (energy) backward toward the horse's tail. (Close your eyes if you are comfortable doing so.)
- Then *wait!*

The wait is hugely important here. How patient can you be? Your horse needs time to process what he's feeling from you and then respond. Please remember, the horse is not in a hurry, and neither should you be. We want to keep him in the "thinking" mode and not force the back up on him. It should be done by feel for both of you.

Your horse will likely offer you a sequence of responses. His ears will flick back to you, acknowledging the "conversation." He will start to move forward when he feels the energy circulating in your center. If he does, close your hands just enough to say, "Nope, that's not the right answer." At this moment, you are very likely to experience the sensation of moving backward, especially if your eyes are closed (which I suggest). However, your horse may or may not actually be moving backward at this time. If you have chosen to do this with your eyes closed, it will be helpful to have someone else watching the horse to keep you posted on what his responses are.

Next, your horse will most likely start to lean back, soften in front, and take a step backward. Continue to recycle your breath and ask for at least two steps before releasing. If you release your (very light) contact here, you will break the line of communication with the horse and he will read it as a stop.

You can build on the exercise from here to incorporate more steps. Remember that we aren't looking for perfection at this point. It is just a lesson in our own mindfulness. Can we slow down, consider the horse, be patient, use clear intent, correct our own bodies, and send a clear message?

Obviously, in a show ring you probably wouldn't take this amount of time to back your horse. However, by following and practicing these steps, you will find your horse getting so responsive that he will soften and back up when you exhale and start your energy flow. That you *will* have time to do in the show ring.



Centers aligned! I love these illustrations. As you can see here, I am turning from my center. Tucker is balanced and confident through the turn and our "seams" (my zipper and the center of his chest) are perfectly aligned—a true sign of riding in harmony.





Left: Take a look at Tucker and me in this turn. To cue him, I have used my inside rein and am looking in the direction I want to go. Check out his legs and body as he maneuvers through the turn. Because I have left my body out of the cue, I have surprised and unbalanced him. His whole expression is saying, "Hey lady, you could have warned me of a change!" Right: To perfect the turn, you simply need to turn from your center as I am demonstrating here. I have exaggerated the turn in this picture to really emphasize the body position. Turning this much would warrant a really sharp or quick turn from Tucker.

## Task: Turning Your Horse

One of our main goals in riding should be to stay out of our horse's way and let him do his job. Being able to keep both yourself and your horse balanced while turning can be a big challenge. Here is a technique that demonstrates how to improve your balance and your turns.

When you turn your horse, do you:

- Open your inside rein?
- Pull back or in with your inside rein?
- Bring your outside rein to his neck?
- Put your inside leg on the girth?
- Put your outside leg behind the girth?
- Put your outside thigh on the saddle?

A mindful turn is this simple:

- Locate your center.
- Turn from your center and allow your body to come with you. The turn is very subtle.
- Keep your nose in alignment with your shirt buttons or belt buckle.
- Less is more, so don't overdo the turn with your center, just apply the turn until your horse responds and then straighten out.
- Maintain even shoulder height and even contact with your seat bones throughout the turn to keep from leaning.

This exercise and halting with your breath are two of my favorite exercises to teach at a clinic. Riders are always amazed at how they can do so much with so little. They can actually turn their horses with no reins and halt with just their breath!

Next month, I'll share some techniques to help you achieve self-carriage and true balance within yourself when you're on the horse. **PH**

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