

CENTERED RIDING

by Sally Swift



"Wonderfully imaginative in finding just the right psychological images to go beyond the mere mechanics of riding... indispensable."

—William Steinkraus

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Summary

Now let's put together some of the images and movements I have described to you in this book. Then go out and work your horse. Visualize how you want him to look and how you will carry yourself so that both of you work together most effectively. Keep this picture active in your mind. Center yourself and think of your other basics. Give your horse as much variety as possible. Variety makes work interesting for you both. If you are working in a riding arena, don't stay forever on a twenty-meter circle, just because the first ones didn't work. Correct the problem by switching to other things—make up and down transitions, do some lateral work, come back to your circle, then take it to another location and work it again. If you or your horse do things more easily in one direction than the other, always work the easy way first. This gives you the good image and the good feel, and it gives your horse satisfaction. Then try the harder way. If you are honest with yourself, you will find that the one-sidedness that you feel is in the horse is really more often in you. If you can correct your one-sidedness, his one-sidedness will disappear at the same time.

Feel that you have one skin with your horse, that you are a horse-person connected through your centers. Keep the engine building energy in the horse and let it flow up through your center and out, as you use your aids. The precision of your aids is critical. You can center yourself to your heart's content, but if you give your horse a fuzzy aid, you'll still confuse him. Ask yourself, "Am I centered? Am I visualizing myself and my horse? Am I being precise?"

If you meet resistances, you can now rely on alternative techniques rather than muscle power to work your way out of a problem. When you push and bang with your legs and haul your horse around in an effort to overcome resistance, you will only throw your own body around

and upset the horse. But if your body is poised and deep, if your center is below your navel, if your legs are surrounding your horse and are sensitive to all the muscles of his body, as well as to energy coming through, you can almost whisper to the horse with your aids and he will respond generously. Use the right brain most of the time and the left brain occasionally to feed into the right brain; but keep the conversation elastic between soft and hard eyes, right and left brain.

To ride this way you need to have a trained body. That is why we did so much work at the beginning with anatomy and the function and use of each part of the body. If things go wrong—even while you are centering, breathing, and using soft eyes—check to see whether you have stiffened your neck and head. Then travel down through your shoulders, lower back, hips, knees, ankles, and toes—any one of which can upset the applecart. Always start at the top, since the head and neck vitally influence *all below*. See the picture as a whole and be aware of how you feel. That is how you will find the problems that are stopping you from being correct. Throw them away. Remove all tensions. Get that tight part of your body functioning again. Edit your videotape, use your instant replay, and go out and work again.

At one time I had a student named Gary. Gary was not an advanced rider, but he had sound knowledge and was a diligent pupil. One day, as I watched him, he looked tense and angular, his plain little mare wavered on the straight line, and her rhythm was uneven and short. My usual suggestions did not help much. The next day I asked Gary to try a different approach. I asked him to be quiet, not talk out loud, not even use words in his thinking as he rode, but try instead to use only feelings and sensations, to search for the feeling of the body moving under him.

I asked him to imagine how it would feel to make each needed correction, then to feel the actual correction as he made it, and follow that up by sensing whether the correction was successful. I told him he must constantly

feel and sense what was right, what was wrong, what was needed. He must stay within himself with soft receiving eyes and seat.

It was wonderful to watch the change as he rode. Gary no longer looked angular, but as if he were one with his horse. And the little mare trotted forward smoothly with rhythm, forming the best circles and serpentines she had ever made. Several people who had been watching were full of praise for the way the mare was now going.

But Gary, when he came in, was utterly confused at our praise. To him it had seemed a totally uneven, awkward ride. His horse had constantly tried to change pace and veer off to one side or the other, so he had to keep correcting her all the time. We talked and explained, until finally he realized that always before he had only concentrated on his own body. This was the first time he had listened to his horse and allowed himself to feel her movements—her wiggles and uneven paces that he had been unaware of previously. Having felt them now, he set to work to correct them and it was the making of these corrections that made the ride feel so jerky and uncomfortable.

Gary's face suddenly cleared. A whole new concept of right-brain riding opened up to him. With this kind of sensitivity he could have the finesse to turn a puttering, twisting horse into one who would move with forward, swinging strides. Out he went again to put it into practice, but this time with shining eyes and open awareness in his expression. He realized that from now on he could ride in a fresh and wonderful way—as if he were part and parcel of his horse.

Gary's experience is a typical result of the centered approach to riding. You, too, will think of riding as a beautiful dance, full of motion, aesthetics, coordination, and flow. If your horse is moving well, his feet will be light on the ground. They will touch the ground as if they were springs. His joints will bend freely and vigorously. Your joints will be equally free—from the top of your head to the soles of your feet. Your dream ride will come true.