

Centered Riding and The Show Ring

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Is there a place for Centered Riding within the competitive arena? Can we be successful in the “real” world and still be true to our Centered Riding principles? I have found that Centered Riding enhances my competitive experience, and it can for you, too, if you wish. Certainly, one appeal of Centered Riding practice is to become more and more in tune with your horse, irrespective of what anyone else may think, including judges. That’s not its only outcome, though.

Let’s get this straight: I am a very competitive rider. I competed in the Sydney Paralympic Games in 2000, World Championships in 1999, 2003, and 2007, and have carried the American flag on my saddlepad on other international occasions as well. I will be competing in the Paralympics this summer in Hong Kong with my young horse, Radetzky. In addition to international competition, I have been very successful here in the US. I earned my USDF Bronze, Silver and Gold Medals, and was the 74th person to earn all three awards. I have consistently won national and regional dressage awards, with horses of many varied breeds and backgrounds, at all levels from Training Level to Grand Prix. In 2007, my young horse Radetzky was USEF Training Level Champion, and my horse Richmond was USEF Zone Champion at both Intermediare II and Grand Prix. I’m an active judge as well, judging dressage shows through Grand Prix and events at all levels as well.



Centered Riding has been a pivotal center point to my riding career. Sally Swift helped me with Bordeaux (David) from the time he was at Training Level through Grand Prix, and on beyond that to our bridle-less Grand Prix freestyle exhibitions. Of course I have other trainers as well, to help with the technical training aspects, but it’s been Centered Riding that has provided me with insights and awareness that have kept me focused and able to continue improving in my own riding.

Centered Riding, by its nature, is goalless, meaning that there are no clear demarcations of achievement nor any solid deadlines. We can strive to achieve a higher Instructor level, but there is no outside, objective evaluation of our progress. That’s the biggest value of competition, for me. I get to have an objective assessment of how effective my training has been, and I get feedback from someone who knows nothing about my particular situation about what I need to do to continue to improve. Even a local schooling show provides that type of feedback, and I think that is extremely valuable. It’s important to me to get that comparison with the elusive “10” score, and that is something that is unavailable within the Centered Riding framework, by design. Centered Riding allows us to become introspective and contemplative; competition gives us the chance to decide the value of our work at home.

I have few students who compete regularly, and that’s fine with me, too. I do like to encourage students to show at least a few times a year, to provide outside validation of their progress with their horses. There are shows for riders of every level. Within dressage, which is my particular interest, riders can show at Intro, just walk-trot, to demonstrate knowledge of school figures and accurate, simple transitions. There are levels proceeding from there, all the way to Olympic level, as the training progresses. For riders who enjoy jumping, or Western events, or saddle-seat, there are classes at local shows for all ages and levels of confidence. What is of most value is the willingness to seek outside input. Far too often, riders who never show don’t have a true idea of the effectiveness of their training in furthering their and their horses’ education. It’s extremely challenging to get such feedback in an at-home situation, and it’s not too expensive to go to a show at the local level.

So you're all hepped up to get to a show, and you've sent your entry in (correctly filled out, with your current Coggins and check). Now it's time to put those Centered Riding principles to work at the show itself.

Breathing! Almost all riders forget to breathe in competition. This is perhaps the most important thing to keep at the forefront of your mind as you warm up and get ready to show. Breathing allows your center to snuggle back into your abdomen, where it belongs, instead of choking your throat and making you feel light-headed. Breathing lets you find your most efficient position, Building Blocks, and gives you the chance to stay grounded. Soft eyes are only possible when you are breathing, and for sure you need those soft eyes in a crowded warm-up ring to avoid colliding with the rest of the riders who aren't breathing, don't look where they're going, are ungrounded, and have their centers precariously around their stock pin area. All that practice in the quiet of your own arena pays off here; you can just take some deep breaths, and settle into the comfort of knowing your horse intimately. Your horse will take comfort in your comfort, and he will take deeper breaths too, mirroring your confidence.

Before you head to the show ring, take a few minutes to review how you wish to present yourself and your horse. Go over your course, or test, or pattern in your mind's eye. Review it on paper (you did put it in your pocket, didn't you?) Take a few more deep breaths to stay centered. Pat your horse, and thank him for allowing you to gain this experience.

Once you get into the ring to compete, see if you can make eye contact with the judge or judges. That helps you stay focused and alert. Continue breathing! No, still keep breathing. Still breathe. Take your time to see all that is in the ring, visualizing the patterns and movements and transitions that you and your horse will seamlessly perform a moment before you do them. As you begin, remember to breathe within each part of your performance, and feel your horse's muscles sinuously following your body language. It's all right to enjoy this experience! As you complete your performance, pat your horse again. Before you leave the arena, make a brief observation on what you have learned from this experience.

As you exit the ring, your coach or trainer or mom or husband will have his or her own feedback for you, so make sure that you have given yourself feedback first. Then you can compare it with the feedback from these outside sources. You will then have the chance to compare your performance with the others in your class; depending on the type of show this may take only a few minutes, or it may be an hour or more before the results are posted. If you get a judges' sheet back, read it carefully to gain more insight into what happened in the ring.

Hopefully you will have yet another chance at the same show, to put your new information to use. Remember to breathe, and give yourself enough time to stay settled in your mind before you enter the competition ring again.

At the end of the day, make notes on what went well, and what you think can be improved. Some things can be changed immediately: better turnout, better geography, better use of your warm-up time, and the like. Some things will take more time: your horse needs to get stronger or more confident with the movements, or he and you need to gain more skills. Now you have the information that you need to formulate a program to enhance your performance for the next time. Always go over these notes with your trainer, so that you are all on the same page with the pathforward. If you have different trainers for Centered Riding and for your specialty, make sure you go over this with all the people who will be helping you.

Centered Riding has a lot to offer to competitive riders. Centered Riding in no way replaces training techniques for your horse; it's a way to allow you to communicate with your horse in the most efficient and effective way possible. Centered Riding allows you to learn how to be aware of what you bring to the partnership, and gives you the opportunity to make sure that you are using your Self in the best possible way to enhance your horse's performance. Use these techniques until they become second nature, so that when you find yourself in a situation that requires quick thinking, you don't have to go through the complete checklist of things before you can act and react. Centered Riding was intended as an adjunct for conventional training, not a replacement or as something to be pursued on its own.

Go out and enjoy your horse, and use competition to your advantage, and to further your education!
Happy trails, and may you find the success you dreamed!

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Centered Riding wishes to congratulate Robin and her horse "Radetzky" for their acceptance into the 2008 Paralympics in Hong Kong. We're proud of you Robin and the way you will be representing Centered Riding!

Photo: Robin Brueckmann and "Radetzky"