

Centered Riding and the Psoas

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“If it walks like a duck, quacks like a duck and has web feet, call it a duck.”

By Tom Nagel, author of *Zen & Horseback Riding*



In 2005, I was eating breakfast at the hotel that was hosting the 10th Anniversary Centered Riding International Symposium. One of the people sitting at my table stated that Sally Swift never mentioned specific muscles when she taught. This definitely got my attention, as I was about to give a presentation on how the psoas muscles were the specific core muscles that riders use to stabilize themselves while on horseback.

I gave my presentation about the psoas muscles with Sally Swift herself sitting in the front row. She periodically nodded her head throughout my presentation. Sally Swift's assistant came up to me later and asked if I had seven books with me

that she could buy because Sally wanted to give them to her friends. I was more than happy to give her the books.

A few months later, I called Sally Swift and asked her if she would write a foreword for my book, *Zen & Horseback Riding*. She said yes and in her foreword she wrote: “Throughout the book Tom has taken care to explain things simply and fully. He especially concentrates on the psoas muscles, how they function, and the importance of their correct use in tying the legs at the inner thigh to the lumbar spine as it levels the pelvis. The psoas muscles are also important in breathing.”

On page seventeen of *Centered Riding*, Sally Swift explains centering: “To find your center, simply point a finger at your belly to a spot between your navel and your pubic arch, the front of your pelvis. Deep behind that point, against the front of the spine, lies your center of balance, your center of energy, and your center of control. From the bottom of your diaphragm and rib cage, large muscles stretch to the lower spine. Other muscles connect from there into the pelvis and down to the thighs. These are some of the deepest and strongest muscles in your body. ... At the site of this large nerve center and the heavy controlling muscles, is your center.”

In an interview for the February 2007 issue of *USDF Connection*, Sally Swift was asked by Jennifer O. Bryant: “In many published interviews, you talked about your therapist, Mabel Ellsworth Todd, and how she helped you to overcome your scoliosis by using your mind to reach muscles that can't be accessed with the arms and legs.” Sally Swift's response: “We always lay on our backs on the table with our knees bent and our arms crossed over our chests. Miss Todd talked a lot about the psoas muscle, which is the biggest and most powerful muscle in the body. It runs from the inner thigh over the front of the pelvis and attaches to the lumbar spine, which is between the rib cage and the pelvis. The psoas lifts the legs and moves them around. Miss Todd would maybe have you lift your leg and think about that muscle and how it would work, and the thought helped the muscle to work.”



Bryant continues: "You've often said that, as a rider, you learned to center yourself by 'dropping a ball so that it landed in your pelvis – plunk! – like landing in mud.' Where did this discovery come from?" Sally Swift: "It definitely comes from [Todd's] work of imagery. She used imagery simply to supplement what she wanted to happen, and I use it the same way. It never was a thing in itself." Bryant: "Does centering require muscular effort?" Sally Swift: ... "I don't teach much about individual muscles because then people get left-brained about them. I teach about areas more than I teach about individual muscles. I do teach somewhat about the psoas because it is so encompassing in its work. But I teach more about fully understanding in your mind and imagination how it works."

During a radio interview on Rick Lamb's The Horse Show in 1997, Sally Swift states: "I keep hearing you [Rick Lamb] talk about nothing but the visualization. Images are good, but the images do not stand up if you do not understand the body. ... Mabel Todd in Boston, I went to see her twice a week for years. ... I learned how the body worked. I learned the value of the deep psoas muscles in the pelvis very early in life. ... I learned about my body from the age I was seven. I was very conscious of it."

On the cover of Centered Riding is a picture of Sally Swift teaching. She is using her psoas muscles to stand and teach. She also has her hand placed over her center. Sally Swift had this posture and awareness in her body. Since her passing, there has been discussions as to whether Centered Riding instructors should mention the psoas muscles in their teaching. To this I would say yes!

Photos: (Top left) Tom Nagel and Sally Swift at a Centered Riding Symposium (Right) Tom Nagel teaching about the psoas muscles