

Centered Riding and Dressage

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Centered Riding is defined as a system based on classical principles. Though Centered Riding applies to all disciplines of riding and driving horses, it is the age-old understanding of how horses and people connect to which Sally Swift's ideas adhere.. Dressage is one discipline that has been well documented for centuries.

The word "Dressage" carries different implications depending on the context in which it is used. It can describe the basic training of a horse. The definition comes from the old French "drecier" which meant "to set up, arrange or align", and which became ultimately "dresser" - "to train." Dressage is a competitive sport, comprising one aspect of Eventing, and it can also indicate the more specialized, gymnasticized training leading to the Haute Ecole (high school) movements and the "airs above the ground."

One of the handouts that Centered Riding instructors have been passing out for years starts out by asking "What is Centered Riding?" and answers the question. "Centered Riding is a new way of expressing the classical principles of riding, using body awareness, centering, and imagery, developed by Sally Swift. Centered Riding answers the question of "how" when your instructor tells you "what" to do to communicate with your horse. It can give you a new perspective on riding and other aspects of your life."

Sally has always stated very clearly that Centered Riding applies to all disciplines since it applies to the essential requirements of good riding and it is focused on the rider. Most of our information about riding is of necessity about the horse. Especially in our times when many people who are riding may not have grown up with horses, what is obvious to a lifelong horseman needs to be explained to the novice. Having said that, Centered Riding has an interesting role to play in a discussion of Dressage. There is a distinction being drawn in the literature between "Competitive Dressage" and "Classical Dressage." Though that interplay may not be of interest to all of you in and of itself, it does bring up an opportunity to look closely at Centered Riding both philosophically and practically. It seems that the brouhaha about "competitive" vs "classical" revolves around who gets pinned at a given show and what the Monday morning quarterbacks (and some very professional quarterbacks as well) think about the performances that get rewarded.

The point that connects this discussion to Centered Riding and its teaching comes from the fact that I believe every rider who goes to a show is out there riding the best she or he knows how to perform. The judges go through an exhaustive training process to be considered competent to serve as adjudicators. They are also out there to do the best they know how, or they probably wouldn't be asked back to judge again. Whether a rider or a judge goes out and does what is ultimately best for the horse can be another thing altogether. The discrepancy comes from how those riders and judges understand what they have been taught and how that understanding is put into action. With a deeper understanding of the information applied to the occasion, the result could bring both sides of the argument closer together. It seems to me that Centered Riding encourages deeper understanding and provides a way to bridge the gap between thought and action.

In the case of "Competitive Dressage" the judges serve (at least) three gods. They judge the riders' equitation. They judge the fulfillment of the goals set out on the test. They also judge the gaits and therefore, ultimately, the breeding of the horse. All three of these judgments are important to the life and health of the business of Dressage Sport. The riders who ride in the shows tailor their rides as best they can to what they understand of their written scores, and it matters how they do on that day – not always how their ride will contribute to their relationship with their horse or his future training.

All of us who are riding, training, and teaching today are so lucky. There is such a plethora of information easily available about horses and our training and use of them. Their anatomy and physiology, psychology and biomechanics – it's all there – far more than we can hope to assimilate if we want to have any time with our horses. But, the classical information can be whittled down to some pretty basic stuff, and that is where Centered Riding comes in. In the 2010 yearbook, you will read more about the application of Centered Riding to Dressage, how the Four Basics and other principles of Centered Riding provide ways for us to stay within the parameters of classical principles, how the Centered Riding precepts of “Aware and Allow” can help you and your horse, and how an understanding of the structure and biomechanics of horses and riders can help develop their natural abilities.

Photo: Carla Chase riding Poetry in Motion