

Western Centered Riding

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There is nothing like watching a really good cutting horse and its rider working a cow, or a roper who handles horse and lariat with ease, or a reining horse performing in perfect balance. What do all these have in common? Every rider needs a deep center/seat and good body control and awareness. Sounds familiar? Centered Riding basics can be very much appreciated by riders in Western events.

Living in the Northwest has given me opportunities to work with riders, horses and cattle and the bottom line is - everyone needs to be centered. Co-teaching with trainers in each of these events has been not only fun, but reinforced the genius of Sally Swift's basics. Also, I realized that the work itself, with cattle or reining patterns, or ropes, gives more and new meaning to these basics. In short - having a 'job' to do gives riders AND horses a real awareness of the need for these

basics. The work seems to drive the lessons 'home.'

Jeanie Smith, a cutting horse trainer from Oregon, said that before Centered Riding, the focus was always on the horse, not the rider. Good horse trainers are rarely able to help beginner riders, especially with the activity going on when working a cow! She said if you can't move correctly on the horse, then it affects both the horse and the cow. How the horse moves thru his body makes for success, and this cannot be accomplished if the rider is not correct. "Centered Riding helps the rider to help the horse," says Jeanie. "When the focus becomes the cow, the horsemanship never catches up."

The Four Basics of CR are very important to cutting. The use of soft eyes to cut a cow out of the herd and to avoid tunnel vision is essential. Typically riders hold their breath, which does not give them the deep center they need in quick moves. The body alignment is important for a deep seat and for the horse's own balance under the rider.

The results of good body position are manifested immediately in successfully maneuvering a cow. It makes crystal clear the principles of Centered Riding: achieving the same results with less - less energy from the rider, less energy from the horse provides a clean run.

Reining horse trainer, Dick Gately, from Washington, turns out beautiful reining horses. His difficulty was in helping his riders get the same results with their trained horses as he did. With Centered Riding's help, the reining riders were able to be balanced and centered, giving their horses a chance to perform their best. All the basics applied - soft eyes for relaxation, breathing into those amazing sliding stops and keeping a deep center in the spins. Alignment on the fast galloping run downs for straightness, and a lined up and centered body for the flying changes.

Correct riding with the reiners has helped them keep their horses sound and performing. Not always the case with many of these hard working horses. Balanced, breathing and effective riders show the results at competitions.

These are student Ken Smith's comments from a recent reining show:

"Magnum and I did great in the warm up, thanks to soft eyes and breathing. (Phew!) Like you said, work on ME, so I did. Thanks to Dick, Magnum knows his job so the rest is up to you know who. In the pattern, our spins were good - he tried to jump out on me going left, but I stayed centered!! and got him back to me. He actually stayed relaxed ("musta" been that breathing thing!) and listened to me all the way around the big circles in both directions. Got both lead changes "cuz" I remembered to stay in the middle of my saddle and move my hips. Now pay attention, here comes the part you won't believe - I didn't myself but we got it on video. We came around the end for our first rundown, (this is where he feels and acts like a locomotive) but he stayed relaxed and listened. (I remembered the building blocks instead of throwing myself halfway up his neck so the poor guy could stay under me!) I built up speed instead of being shot out of a cannon. We ran down, I said 'Whoa' and he did and I did and it felt wonderful! (I actually think I was still breathing) When we went for the final stop and back up, it was great, and the backup was quiet! We ended up with a 68.5 tied for 3rd out of a 36 horse class."

(Ken says this story is true, names have not been changed, and they all had fun at the reining show.)