

What Centered Riding does for me as a Teacher

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Like most of you, I am a true believer in Centered Riding and in the great gift Sally Swift's creativity has brought us. I received my Level I training in 1994 and am now a Level III, with 14 years of teaching to my credit. If CR has taught me anything, it is to listen to my horses. I have learned through experience, and some painful errors, to watch my horses as closely as I watch my students; almost always, my horses tell me exactly where the rider needs help. If my school horses could talk (and my friend, Tony, a little bay Morab, who's been my faithful partner for 16 years, almost can), they would list the benefits of Centered this way:



1. People don't pull on my mouth anymore to get me to turn; instead I feel their level pelvis gently swivel in the direction they want me to go.
2. People seem to understand that my back is sensitive, and that when they ride with their feet grounded and their building blocks stacked up right, I can carry them more freely.
3. People don't leave me feeling lost and directionless (they also don't let me get away with jerking my head down or swerving) because their soft eyes look out for danger, and show me which way to go.
4. People on me are often singing or talking, so I can feel them breathing, and that relaxes me.

Even school horses are so willing to be our riding partners; they ignore or disobey us only when there is such an overload of unclear or excessive signals that they have to shut down their awareness to save their bodies and their minds. The great value of Centered Riding for them, and for me as a teacher, is the clarity and simplicity of the Four Basics. As a teacher, when I slow down and allow each student to gain not just intellectual awareness but a true physical awareness of where her body parts are, how those parts move, and how that movement influences the horse (for better or worse), the horses are more willing and responsive and the riding improves.

Often, my goals as a conscientious instructor get in the way of this accomplishment. I use lesson plans, with one or two clear and measurable objectives, to achieve specific riding skills and to avoid boredom for horse, rider, and teacher. But when I focus too much on what I can get done in any single lesson, I get in the way of the more long-lasting results I want. As I wrote in the newsletter when I was just starting out, many years ago: Which is more important in the long run, to do a serpentine or actually feel when the inside hind leg is rising? The first is flashier and more fun; the second is slower and sometimes frustrating, because the student has to focus on a single action/reaction between the horse's body and her own rather than a pattern. And yet there's no question that the more perfect serpentine will eventually be accomplished by the student who can feel that instant when the rebalancing and change in bend can be most easily granted by her equine partner.

When we as teachers can focus on what is actually happening moment-by-moment in the ring (which requires us to develop in ourselves the same high level of self-awareness we ask of our students), we will accomplish just the right amount. Our horses will thank us the best way they know how, by staying sounder, lasting longer, and remaining sensitive and willing to execute our requests. And our riders will thank us because they truly understand how to identify and allow changes in their own bodies, with or without a teacher!

Photo: Sarah Seidman and Cinco, her six-year-old Aussie whom she says is her true friend and companion