

Book Review: *Centered Riding* by Sally Swift
(North Pomfret, Vermont: Trafalgar Square Books, 1985)
By Mary Trafford, Level III Centered Riding® clinician

Sally Swift developed her ideas about riding over a lifetime that spanned close to a full century. When she died in April 2009, just 18 days shy of her 96th birthday, Swift had become a force to be reckoned with in the equestrian world – a renowned and innovative thinker whose approach to riding called for visualization, body awareness, empathy and mindfulness.

Centered Riding, the first of two books by Sally Swift, was published in 1985. At the time, it was revolutionary. Today, it is a true classic, an international best-seller in equestrian books. Swift's approach to the horse-rider partnership is as popular, effective and relevant as ever. It is a book I encourage every rider, instructor, trainer and horse lover to read.

The ideas expressed in *Centered Riding* are especially applicable to therapeutic riding. Swift once said, "We who have struggled with physical disabilities can often teach and explain coordination more easily."

Indeed, it was Swift's own experience with disability that led her to write *Centered Riding*. From childhood, Swift had a back condition called scoliosis (lateral curvature of the spine). This led her to work with some remarkable teachers who helped her better use and understand what she referred to as her "awkward body." In *Centered Riding*, she collects these ideas, builds on them, and presents them in a clear and systematic manner as an overall system or approach to riding that is accessible to riders of all levels and abilities.

Swift's writing style is almost conversational as she lays out her ideas in a logical and progressive way. Very good-quality black-and-white photographs and line drawings accompany the text, which is pleasingly laid out.

The book is very user-friendly. As a Centered Riding clinician, I encounter riders who have actually used *Centered Riding* as a kind of riding self-help manual. They tell me they read a bit and then ride, applying Swift's ideas themselves, as a sort of stop-gap measure until they can access an instructor versed in the techniques. Over and over, I have heard people say they find the book well-written and easy to understand. I even met an octogenarian who read the entire book, just for pleasure, having never really ridden in her life. She said she enjoyed it thoroughly!

Swift's appealing style is evident from the outset. Early on in the book, she challenges readers to "Pretend You Are a Horse," so we can better understand exactly how the way we use our body affects the horse. This is important to the success of Swift's teachings in *Centered Riding* – that

it is a system that answers the question of “how” rather than simply “what” to do to communicate with your horse.

Swift then introduces the Four Basics – Eyes, Breathing, Centering and Building Blocks. The Four Basics form not only the heart of her teaching in *Centered Riding*, but as she promises, they also “make your horse happy.” Not only is this true, but the Four Basics also make you, the rider, happy! When I’m teaching, I sometimes tell my students, “The Basics are like an imaginary ‘tool kit’ containing everything you need for better riding. Once you’ve learned them, you can always carry them with you, ready and easy to use whenever you need them.”

Swift then discusses how we learn, and how an understanding of our anatomy can increase the rider’s awareness and control of the body. Through 20 chapters of text and pictures, she takes us through all the gaits and many key concepts in riding, including halt, walk, trot and canter, as well as transitions, circles, turns, jumping and lateral work. Finally, Swift includes a handy point-form appendix, summarizing the useful images in *Centered Riding*, and a comprehensive index.

Now available in 15 languages and having sold close to one million copies worldwide, *Centered Riding* is a true classic, a must-read for all riders and instructors. Through it, Swift teaches us much more than simply how to ride better. The ideas she offers give us insight into how to take care of ourselves, our horse, our students, our family/friends and our circumstances in life. People often told Sally Swift that through *Centered Riding*, “you have not only helped my riding, you have changed my whole life.” I have found this to be delightfully true!

For more information on *Centered Riding*, visit the website at www.centeredriding.org.

Mary Trafford is a Level III Centered Riding Clinician, a Canadian Therapeutic Riding Instructor (CTRI – lapsed), and a former CanTRA and Canadian Pony Club Examiner. She lives in Chelsea, Quebec.