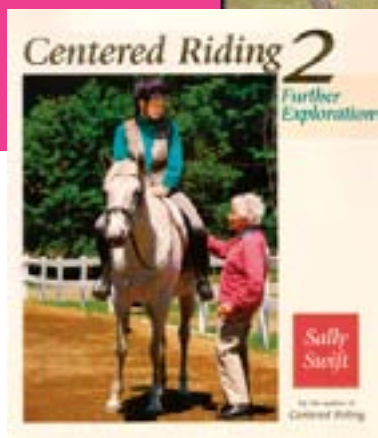
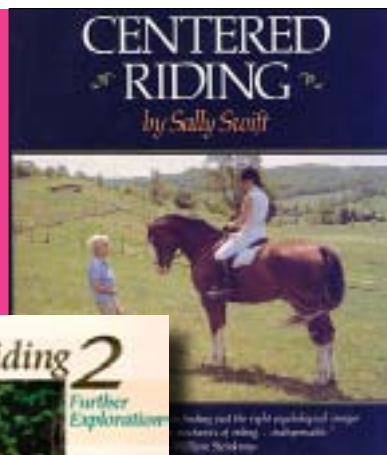


WHAT SALLY SWIFT TAUGHT ME



Thirty years after the publication of *Centered Riding*, a leading instructor and clinician describes how Sally Swift changed her approach to riding, teaching and life.

By Susan E. Harris

In January 1985, I read an article in EQUUS that changed my life. It was the first of a two-part excerpt from Sally Swift's book, *Centered Riding*. Back then, Swift was traveling the country giving clinics to a growing following of riders eager to learn her techniques for developing improved self-

awareness and body control. But her book—and its preview in EQUUS—was the first time Swift's fundamental concepts of breathing, soft eyes, centering and balance were shared with a wider audience. I had ridden all of my life, but Centered Riding



was different from all the other instruction I'd ever had. I was intrigued, so I tried the techniques out on Colonel, my Clydesdale/Thoroughbred field hunter with the trot from hell. Wonder of wonders, I could sit Colonel's trot! And it was easy and effortless, with a level of harmony and balance that I hadn't been able to achieve with that horse.

Ready to learn more, I decided to call Sally Swift. She spent an hour on the phone with me—

a total stranger. A few weeks later I took my first official Centered Riding lesson and attended Sally's Centered Riding Instructor Clinic. I was hooked. And my riding, my teaching, my training and my thinking began a transformation that continues to this day.

The Centered Riding Instructor Clinic was a revelation. As a longtime professional, running a school for riding instructors, I had taken many lessons and clinics in dressage, jumping and horsemanship, some by prominent instructors and trainers. In all of them, I was told what to do—sit in this position, apply those aids, ride this exercise,



keep my back straight, eyes up, heels down and legs on. And, amid all of that, I was told to relax!

Some riders are gifted “naturals”—they don’t know how they do what they do, but it comes easily to them (and many of them don’t understand why the rest of us mortals have such trouble with the skills that come naturally to them). That’s where Sally was so different. She taught us how to get the rider’s body to achieve those things, how the rider’s state of mind affects the body, and how both interact with the horse. It won’t make the average rider into Charlotte Dujardin or Beezie Madden, but it can help riders of any level of skill or experience be the best they can be.

Another powerful aspect of that first clinic with Sally was her positive attitude in teaching, and the affirming learning environment she

created. I had attended many clinics in which I’d heard not only negative comments from the clinician but a chorus of snarky comments from the spectators; you have to put on your mental armor to ride in such a situation. In Sally’s clinic, she modeled a clear and supportive teaching style, so that by the first morning, when someone got something right or showed even a small improvement, the audience broke into spontaneous applause. I wanted more of that!

Who was this remarkable lady and how did she become one of the most influential riding teachers in world? Sally would tell a little of her story at every clinic, and I still do, too, so here it is, as she told it to me and others.

In her youth, Sally took lessons from some famous instructors of the day, including Vladimir Littauer and Col. Guirey of the Boots and Saddles School. Decades later, after she retired from work, she once again became active in the equestrian world.

IN THE BEGINNING

Sally Swift developed what came to be called Centered Riding because she had a disability. She had severe scoliosis as a young girl (possibly from an undiagnosed case of polio), and if you saw her walking, you might think, “What a crooked back that woman has.” In the 1920s, she was in danger of living with a heavy back brace and possibly a wheelchair. Her parents sent her to a pioneering physical therapist and bodyworker, Miss Mabel Todd, who wrote a book called *The Thinking Body*. Miss Todd taught Sally about functional anatomy, and she introduced her to “ideokinesis,” which means “the picture you hold in your mind moves your body.”



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Instead of telling Sally to stand up straight, Miss Todd would say, “Walk as if you had a string from your head to the clouds,” or other images. Using mental imagery, which is now a common technique in sports psychology, helped Sally use her body automatically and gracefully. Todd also encouraged Sally to ride, not only because she was already a dedicated equestrian, but also because riding helped the two sides of her body to function more equally.

Meanwhile, young Sally had a secret. Deep in her body behind her navel, she envisioned what she called “that ball.” When she needed to jump a big jump or stay on a horse that bucked, she had to drop “that ball” down deep in the mud; then she could do anything. But she didn’t tell anyone because she thought they would laugh at her. That was not how riding was taught in the 1930s!

Throughout her youth, Sally took lessons from some famous instructors of the day, including Vladimir Littauer and Col. Guirey of the Boots and Saddles School, and she went on to become a riding instructor. She taught in summer camps and at a prominent girls’ school. She mostly rode the forward seat in those days, but later she helped start the New England Dressage Association (NEDA). She also became acquainted with Denise McCluggage, author of *The Centered Skier* (1977), which influenced her thinking about centering applied to riding.



TEACHING AND LEARNING

When Sally entered college and eventually the working world, she began to ride less and less. But in the mid-1970s, after retiring from the Holstein-Friesian Association, in Brattleboro, Vermont, she once again became more active in the equestrian world. She began riding more frequently and taught riding to a few friends.

At the same time, she was experiencing trouble with her back, and she

INSTRUCTION: Through groundwork and arena exercises, Sally Swift showed how body awareness, centering and imagery can improve riding.

began to work with Peter Payne, who taught the Alexander Technique and the martial arts. In tai chi, she heard about the “dan tien” or “the center” and thought, “That ball—it has a name!” The Alexander Technique led her to understand more about the “use of the self” (a similar concept to that of a horse “using himself” well), and the importance of freedom and balance of the head and neck in order to free the back and allow the body to move lightly and without stress. Although not an Alexander Technique teacher herself, Sally studied with Majorie Barstow, Danny Pevsner and other Alexander Teachers here and in England. Sally was especially interested in music, and she gave a presentation to the Marlboro School of Music in Brattleboro, Vermont; some of the participants became so fascinated with “Centered Singing”

that they signed up for Centered Riding lessons, too.

At this time, Sally was teaching riding and riding herself, though not



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competing, and working out how centering, tai chi and the principles of the Alexander Technique applied to teaching better riding. She'd go to clinics taught by Michael Page, Denny Emerson and Walter Christensen and take notes. These instructors knew that Sally did something with riders' bodies; sometimes, when they had a rider who was stiff, crooked, tense and having trouble, they'd ask Sally to work with them, and she'd get the rider into alignment, have them breathe, balance, release tension, and they'd be successful. Denny Emerson said, "Sally, you'd better write this down!" and that became the book *Centered Riding*—still the best-selling book on riding in 17 languages. Sally followed up that book with two DVDs on Centered Riding, and 17 years later, *Centered Riding II: Further Exploration*.

She said it took her 17 years to write the second book because every time she learned something new, she'd say, "Now I have to rewrite everything!"—and Sally was a lifelong learner!

THE MASTER'S APPRENTICE

I followed Sally Swift around during the mid-1980s, and in 1989, I was lucky to be chosen as her apprentice and travel with her, taking lessons from her in Brattleboro between clinics. There were also lessons in the Alexander Technique, an extensive reading list and endless discussions of anatomy, centering, bodywork and riding theory—as well as how all of this applied to riding and teaching. We did 16 clinics in five months, driving around New England and traveling to Michigan, Oregon, Washington, California and Colorado.

When you were Sally Swift's apprentice, you carried the bags, helped with

SCHOOLING:
Sally Swift had many apprentices over the years.



Sally taught riders that if you get the skeleton in alignment, the muscles will follow—the opposite of “muscling” the rider into position or the horse into obedience.

travel details, led horses in lessons, and rode whenever there was a spare horse. I got to ride everything from a grand prix dressage horse to a mule (and I learned a lot about centering from the mule!) I was often asked to lead a horse as Sally taught her favorite body awareness lesson, which involved the rider being led so they could ride with their eyes closed and go into “pure feel.”

This was a revelation even to very advanced riders; I was privileged to lead Lendon Gray's horse while she took

a lesson from Sally, who said she'd never seen any rider get so much from a lesson; she only had to say it once and Lendon had it! Another duty of the apprentice was keeping horses from getting too close to Sally and possibly knocking her over; this was not always easy, because in every lesson the horses would move closer and closer to Sally until they were standing with their heads over her and their muzzles near her hair; they knew she was their friend. I also spent a lot of time sitting beside Sally as she taught and taking notes; my way of taking notes is to make sketches with a few notes, so I wound up with a visual record of what I learned from Sally. Many of those sketches became the illustrations for Sally's second book, *Centered Riding II: Further Exploration*.

One of Sally's favorite sayings was, “Ride



your bones!” She taught riders that if you get the skeleton in alignment, the muscles will follow—the opposite of “muscling” the rider into position or the horse into obedience. Sally always carried Herman, her 14-inch demonstration skeleton, with her in a little wooden box. Once we were required to open the box by airport security, and all the officers came over to examine the skeleton—we nearly missed our plane!

A LASTING LEGACY

Sally Swift's work was primarily directed at teaching riders to use their minds and bodies better. In particular, she focused on improving harmony and confidence between horses and riders, and in helping horses move better and use their bodies better through better balance, alignment and centering. She taught riders of all disciplines, including show riders, but she was sometimes distressed at seeing stress and tension in horses and riders in competition.

Sally and I attended a large New England Dressage Association show; one of the highlights was a grand prix freestyle competition. In that class, a bay stallion ridden by Bent Jensen performed a piaffe right in front of us—both horse and rider were so centered, balanced and in harmony in their work that Sally said, “Now I can go home with a happy heart!” Sally also admired the riding of the Spanish Riding School of Vienna, the Cadre Noir at Saumur, Bill Steinkraus and the late Reiner Klimke, among others.

Sally taught a lot about groundwork and bodywork, including how to find the center, align the body, and release excess tension both mentally and physically. This can have a profound and sometimes startling effect, especially if someone has been tight and releases the tension all at once. In one

THE RIGHT TOUCH

Sally was not a therapeutic instructor, but she sometimes helped riders with disabilities. Once she worked with a man who had a type of cerebral palsy that caused him to make constant involuntary movements. He studied riding and tai chi, and he was able to participate in many activities despite his constant movement.

Sally watched him ride, and then talked with him about the center, and how his center could become a place of calm; she used the image of leaves floating on still water. She placed her hands over his center and as they both breathed, he became quiet and still, first in his center, then up and down through his body, until he was sitting quietly on the horse with no involuntary movements. He walked the horse off, and rode around the ring, looking like a soft, quiet rider with no disability for those moments. Afterward, he was able to use centering to help control and cope with his condition.

Sally Swift died in April 2009 at the age of 95.



lesson, the world's most tense teenager came in with the world's most tense Thoroughbred. Sally did a little bodywork with the riders standing next to their horses, including a release of the head and neck. The girl must have had a huge release, because her eyes rolled up and she fainted—I thought, “My gosh, we killed her!” Sally said to rub her earlobes (an acupressure point for

shock), and the girl sat up, shook her head, got on and had the best ride of her life! This doesn't happen often, but I was glad Sally was there—I might never have dared to do bodywork again!

Sally's work has many applications beyond riding. In 1997, she attended the American Riding Instructor Association National Conference, where she was honored as a Master Instructor. Many of the instructor candidates were nervous: They were scheduled to take a battery of certification tests the next day. Sally offered to work with them early in the morning; she got them breathing, using soft eyes, grounded and centered, and taught them the “bubble”—she had each person visualize being engulfed in a clear, protective bubble, in which they kept only positive things like confidence, calm, being organized and remembering what they had learned. Anything negative would bounce off the surface of the bubble. Then she had them move in a group, walking, running, even skipping—and nobody collided; every movement was smooth and coordinated. All 60 instructors floated out of the room with smiles on their faces, ready to face the testing with confidence.

Sally was a lifelong learner and always remained young in her thinking. She was positive, accepting and down-to-earth. When she walked into a room, everyone was drawn to her. She was humble, despite her fame, and connected easily with people of all ages and interests.

She once told me that in her youth, Capt. Federico Caprilli and his method of teaching jumping was a hot topic—everyone discussed the forward seat and was for it or against it. Nowadays, she said, few people even know Caprilli's name, but anyone who jumps uses his method. It was not her

intention to start a separate seat or style of riding—she said she'd be happy if her principles of Centered Riding were eventually absorbed into all good teaching, as Caprilli's work was incorporated into horsemanship. Looking at the horse world today and the way so many of her techniques and theories have been adopted in virtually every riding discipline, I think she has succeeded.

Sally would be the first to say of her work, "This isn't really new—it's actually very old." But she made her work with the body, mind and horse clear and accessible to riders and teachers, and it has changed teaching and horsemanship around the world. This is her greatest legacy.

What I learned from Sally Swift changed my riding, my teaching and my life, and has taken me all over the world teaching Centered Riding. I'm especially interested in the biomechanics of the horse and the rider and in making these simple, clear and understandable to riders, trainers and instructors in all disciplines. Sally's tools of breathing, centering, balance, alignment and body awareness are the first ones I reach for when teaching or training. With these techniques, I can get horses to improve the quality of their movement by working through the rider. That better use of the body makes it easier to teach a classic seat in any kind of riding. Sally's work makes the teaching of riding clearer and easier and helps people work with their bodies even when they are far from perfect. It has made riding, teaching and training a more positive experience, and brings harmony and joy into the horse/rider/teacher relationship.

Thank you, Sally Swift! 🐾

About the author: Susan E. Harris is an international clinician and author from Cortland, New York. She is the author of *Horse Gaits, Balance and Movement, Grooming to Win* and the *U.S. Pony Club Manuals of Horsemanship*.