

T'ai Chi Ch'uan: "groundwork" for the Equestrian

- by Kristin Hermann, [Western Pennsylvania Dressage Assoc. Newsletter](#) Feb. 2006

Patty Swartz (formerly Wissel), was one of the founding members of our WPDA club. In 1988 she discovered Tai Chi and since 1999 has been teaching this body awareness "exercise." Patty's strong passion for horses with over 20 years riding and teaching has returned her to the barn with a combination of skills: **Tai Chi Ch'uan: "groundwork" for the Equestrian.** Recently, she did a workshop at Coventry Equestrian Center and below is a brief synopsis.

Tai Chi is very similar to the aspects taught in Centered Riding. Throughout this workshop Patty related all of the movements our bodies did with the position requirements of riding. Like the training scale in dressage, Tai Chi too has its foundation for learning. One begins with a stance, or basic position to develop awareness of where the feet, hips, shoulders and eyes are. She emphasized how much attention riders give to the proper care, health, saddle fitting, and shoeing of their horses, but what do we do to prepare ourselves to be good riders?

All of the Tai Chi movements focused on total body awareness, balance of one's feet, how we bear weight, bend, and move from the joints... all the while we had to make sure our hips and shoulders were level, our eyes level, head not down or up and, no matter what we did our bodies were to be balanced front and back and side to side (laterally and longitudinally). Bringing awareness to these areas of our body we practiced "walking on ice" to completely feel where we put our weight, and how we walked.

In order to walk on ice, one must feel three points on the sole of the foot: the ball of the big toe, the ball of the little toe and the center of the heel. The eight adult women in this class learned to walk, imagining that each new step was onto a lake of frozen ice totally aware of the weight being distributed into each step. We were not allowed to go forward unless our balance and weight was evenly distributed on the sole of one foot. Patty pointed out, that the average person walking just sort of falls into to the next step instead of moving with awareness and balance.

As we concentrated on learning to align our bodies and move, we also learned some new Chinese terms such as hard, rigid strength is called Li, and soft, flexible strength is called Chin. As riders, we want Chin muscles in our bodies as well as in our horses. Chin muscles while riding will more readily "read" the horse's muscles enabling better communication. Li muscles have more of a tendency to injure and the stiff nature causes resistance in the harmony that is sought between horse and rider.

Patty was full of fun little fun facts that I could remember. One is that our head weighs as much as a bowling ball. I would never have thought this because bowling balls are very heavy. But, that is why it is so important where our head is in riding and Tai Chi. With our heads as heavy as bowling balls, Patty ironically reminded us that our bodies are 85% water and that we need to let our weight (water) sink into our pelvis, hmm ever heard that before? At the same time as we were sinking into our pelvis, and elongating our spines up, we learned to turn (not twist) and walk keeping all of our body parts in alignment.

Just like riding, as with Tai Chi, (and life) the question is, are we enjoying the nuances of learning or more involved with and obsessing over the goals and avoiding the journey!