

Pilates and riding

I. Introduction to pilates & breathing

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The equestrian community increasingly acknowledges the importance of rider fitness, body awareness, and proper body mechanics for riding success and good health. It is clearly recognized that the sport combines two athletes – the horse and the rider. Top riders recommend off horse exercise to improve riding skills and fitness level. The pilates system of exercise is ideally suited to develop and improve rider fitness and function. This article explains pilates and how to find an instructor. A specific skill from pilates, the use of breath for centering, will be described, with exercises. Future articles will delve more into rider anatomy with related pilates exercises (II. The torso of the rider; and III. The leg and shoulder).

The name “pilates”

Joseph Pilates, the man behind the name, developed his unique exercise system in the early 1900's, both to improve his own health and to support the health of fellow World War I internees. As a hospital orderly, he incorporated the variable resistance of springs into rehabilitating movement programs for patients. He translated the use of springs into machines and created the equipment now used in the exercise system. In the late 1920's he established the first pilates studio in New York City. Initially, it was primarily the dance community that embraced this system for enhancing strength, balance and flexibility and total body health and awareness. In the 1980's, however, pilates enjoyed increased popularity as its benefits for all people were realized.

Over the last several decades of study, the pilates has evolved to be in line with contemporary understandings of the function of the human body. It is a testament to Mr. Pilates' ideas, however, that many of his original principles remain intact. Pilates is used by many for toning and fitness, but it is also used in conjunction with physical therapy for movement education translatable to everyday life.

The exercise system is usually taught in one of two formats: private or semi-private sessions using the spring-based pilates equipment, or group mat classes without the equipment, but often with props such as an exercise ball, foam roller, free weights, etc.

Starting pilates

Before starting any new exercise system, check with your healthcare provider. Before starting a pilates program, check that your potential instructor has received training in the pilates exercise system and understands any problems you may have. The Pilates Method Alliance (www.pilatesmethodalliance.org) can provide information about pilates instructors in your area.

Individuals with significant movement problems or injuries will benefit from several private sessions with a qualified instructor. While more expensive than a group or mat

class, the time, money and effort devoted to learning the exercises correctly is well worth the investment. Exercises performed incorrectly can be worse for you than no exercise at all. Weekly pilates sessions may be enough, if you commit to practicing between sessions. Be sure that you are taught exercises that you can practice at home between your scheduled pilates sessions.

Sound and important principles of movement and balance important for riding are taught in some of the simplest exercises of the pilates system. Don't underestimate the benefit of basic, not necessarily easy, exercises.

Given its roots in ballet and dance, some of the movements in the pilates system are very challenging. Some should be avoided in individuals with injuries or movement limitations. As with any exercise, avoid mental or physical fatigue as this is when proper form is lost and injuries more likely to occur. The exercises in this system should be mentally and physically challenging but not so difficult that you are struggling. If an exercise causes pain, stop and tell the instructor. You may be doing it incorrectly, or it may be too difficult.

Stick with it! Learning to use your muscles in a different way takes time and commitment, just as with your horse. The relative quiet of your own workout, compared to the busy environment on horseback, gives you the opportunity to make real changes in your body, rather than repeating engrained habits. You will be rewarded with improved balance and coordination of your body and an ability to stay in sync with your horse's movement. Your horse will feel better, and you will be equipped to influence your horse in a positive way.

Pilates principles

The guiding principles of pilates include:

- Control
- Flowing movement
- Centering
- Range of Motion
- Breath
- Precision
- Stability
- Opposition (of muscle groups).

These principles can be clearly applied to the world of dance. As such, they are also relevant to riding. I have regrouped and simplified these principles to be more directly applicable to riding:

1. Use of breath for centering, control, and mental focus (half halt for riders)
2. Awareness and support of proper posture and alignment
3. Suppleness of the muscles of the hip and shoulder girdle

The remainder of this article will discuss the first principle. The following articles in this series will address principles 2 and 3.

Use of breath for centering, control, and mental focus – a half halt for riders

A productive training ride requires complete focus from the rider. This is not always an easy state of mind. Work stresses, family needs, and obnoxious freeway traffic on the way to the barn can conspire to divide our attention and leave our mind spinning by the time we get to the barn. But your horse doesn't know about all these issues. Your horse can only perceive your lack of focus and inattentiveness. It is unnerving for them to not feel your clear leadership. We owe it to our horses to find a way to quiet the chatter in our heads when we settle in the saddle and commit to clear communication with our equine pal.

The most productive pilates work out similarly requires the participant to focus and feel what is happening with each exercise. While sometimes difficult to do at first, effective pilates teaching helps clients develop the skill of complete focus on their work out. This skill can then be applied to any physical activity, including riding.

Coordinating breathing with movement is a tool from the pilates system that promotes mental focus on a physical activity. This has been one of the most beneficial tools I have learned from pilates. The pilates method of breathing helps me center, focus, organize and prepare myself before doing an exercise or accomplish a task, such as picking up a water bucket. This centering breath gets me to slow down and pay attention when I feel under time stress. This preparatory feature of the centering breath is why I call it the rider's half halt. I also use the same technique when riding a half halt on the horse.

Unlike a relaxing method of breathing, pilates breathing is active and energizing. It involves a lateral, not upward, expansion of the rib cage while breathing in (inhalation) and a drawing in of the deep muscles of the abdomen towards the spine while breathing out (exhalation). It is the exhalation phase of the breathing that promotes centering and support, as the technique activates the muscles of the torso that surround the rider's center of gravity. By using the breath to center, the rider draws upon the deep muscles of the abdomen and back to improve balance and stability of the torso in preparation for a movement. It draws the rider's focus to their own body to optimize effectiveness. The breath helps keep the rider "in the moment" and aware of their body position with the movement of the horse. It has been a very useful tool to enhance riding from the center of the body.

Exercises

1. Breathing and centering exercise laying down

Lay on a mat or towel on the floor on your back, knees bent, feet on the floor about seat bone width apart. Take in a normal breath. As you exhale let your ribcage drop slightly towards the pelvis, and gently and carefully pull in the muscles of your abdomen without flattening your spine onto the floor. This movement should feel fluid, not braced (but this takes practice). Place your hands on your lower abdomen to feel that the muscles scoop in and do not brace outwards. With each inhale breath, try to expand the lower, posterior part of the ribcage, don't let the upper chest rise up. Keep the abdominals scooped in.

With each exhale breath feel your focus and energy concentrate in the lower abdomen – in your “center.”

When done correctly, this exercise should feel like you are creating your own elastic corset or torso support. Your low back should not press into the floor. The ribcage should not push off the floor. There should be little or no movement of any of the bones of your spine or pelvis.

If you are having trouble keeping the abdominals scooped in as you breathe in, place your hands on the sides of your ribs. As you inhale, imagine the ribs swinging outwards, or laterally, towards your hands. In fact, this is the way the ribs are intended to move: like a bucket handle out to the side as you breathe in.

This method of breathing is different from a relaxing “breathing into the belly” type of breath. The goal is to use the exhale breath to activate and connect to the deep muscles of the lower abdomen and back so they are “on” to support you during movement. Since you don’t want this support to waver while you breathe in, breathing into the lateral ribcage allows continued abdominal and back support during inhalation. If the abdominal muscles are released during inhalation, you lose support of the body every time you inhale.

2. Sitting upright and breathing:

A great way to do this exercise is sitting on an exercise ball or chair. Sit upright with your feet flat on the floor, hip width apart. Align your body so that the shoulders are over the pelvis (more about alignment in article II!). Place one hand on your lower abdomen, and one hand on your low back. Take an easy breath in. As you exhale, allow the ribs to drop down, or in slightly (but don’t round your body forward) and pull the abdominal muscles in towards your spine. It should feel as if you are making the space between your two hands thinner. Your hands should feel as if they are coming closer together. As you breathe in again, keep the tone in your lower body, expanding the ribs out to the side.

Practicing breathing sitting upright makes the exercise more relevant to riding than lying down. However, doing the exercise while lying down gives the benefit of the tactile feedback from the floor telling you if you are moving the bones of your spine. You can practice this type of breathing at any time that you think of it. Use it to divert your mind from annoying traffic. Just sit in your car and breathe and center and take satisfaction that you are helping your body learn to organize itself, and helping your brain stay quiet and focused.

3. Using your breath on horseback

Now, we can apply this skill to help you feel mentally focused and centered while riding. While warming up at a walk, practice this active breathing so that you keep a bit of tone in your lower abdomen and back at all times. This should not feel rigid or blocked – the tone should feel like you have wrapped your lower torso in thick elastic – mobile but supportive. Feel how using your breath to center helps drain excess negative tension

from your shoulders. Feel how “heavy” you sit in the saddle when you focus on concentrating the energy of your body in your lower torso.

4. Riding a full halt and half halt using breath.

To challenge the support you gain from your breath, ride walk-halt transitions relying mostly on active breathing to stabilize the torso to aid the horse to halt. With contact, take an easy inhale breath and on the exhale, pull your abdomen in and stabilize your body enough so that your lower torso stops moving with the horse. At the same time, close your fists on the reins and stabilize your arms by your sides (don’t pull back, just stabilize the arms). This rein aid supports the aid from your body. While it may take a bit of practice to accomplish the halt from using primarily your breath to stabilize your body, it is a powerful tool to add to your aiding vocabulary.

It is my belief that a rider can also accomplish a riding half halt primarily using breath to center and stabilize the center of the body. Rather than thinking of the half halt as a series of leg and hand aids, try just using breath supported by the restraining hand aid and driving leg aid. Use momentary exhale breaths to stabilize your torso, tell the horse to listen, step under more, and then release out. In this way the restraining aid comes more from the body saying “whoa” and the rein aid does not get so strong as to block the horse’s forward energy. Use your focus and centering to encourage the horse to stay underneath you.