

Pilates for the Equestrian

By
Karen Boehme
Certified Pilates Instructor

Your horse will not go over the center of a jump. It drags you into the arena walls. The situation is frustrating to you and your horse. Oh, there's nothing quite like the feel of sitting on a 1200 pound temper tantrum. Could your body be sending conflicting messages to your horse and contributing to that melt-down? Pilates training will give you tools to improve communications between you and your horse.

As a long time Pilates student and teacher, I found it fascinating to see the similarities between my Pilates mat sessions and my riding instructor's techniques.

Many riding instructors cue "bellybutton to the sun" and "sit on your back pockets." It's exactly the same technique that's used in exercises like the Teaser and the Open Leg Rocker. The pelvic floor connection that's required to maintain the "C" curve in the Teaser, is essential to maintaining the elongated spine and core connection that gives us a deeper and more balanced seat on the horse. That deep seat and core connection allows more freedom of movement and functional strength in the arms and legs, which enables one to use these aids to give clear signals to our horse.

Ideally, as the rider scoops the pelvis forward, the horse reacts by engaging the joints in the hind legs (its engine). Without that deep connection, some riders tend to develop shortened back muscles and weak, elongated abdominal muscles which give them that "sway back" position. This results in a less balanced body, which tends to cause riders to grab on their reins for balance and use their legs like a vice. You increase the odds of being pitched right out of the saddle at the first unanticipated move that your horse makes. While holding on for dear life, your pelvis locks up, your spine becomes stiff, and all of this results in your horse stiffening up and becoming unbalanced. Often, this will cause the horse



(Continued from page 1)

to misbehave.

The rider's "Pilates Box" (area between our shoulders and hips) has a direct influence on the horse's "box" (area between shoulders and haunches). The horse transfers energy from the ground up through your body. A strong core connection allows the lower extremities to absorb some of the shock in the lower body, and reduces the shock sent to the upper back, shoulders, neck and head. Core stability can be used to transmit energy down through your lower extremities to improve contact and impulsion in your horse.

It is important to have the critical eye of your Pilates instructor, to assess your posture and check for asymmetries. It is possible that a slight rotation in your pelvis, or shortened muscles on one side of the body, can be influencing your horse to be crooked over jumps or to drift off to one side or the other. Pilates training can make improvements in many muscle issues, and since the training improves our postural awareness, it improves our awareness in the saddle.

Aside from working on our pelvic floor connection, Mat and Reformer exercises also develop a strong stable core, while you independently move your limbs. Exercises such as Leg Circles, on both the Reformer and the Mat, challenge core stabilization and are excellent for opening up tight hips. The Cadillac and Reformer exercises offer almost limitless opportunities to increase flexibility, functional strength, control and the movement awareness that we need when we ride.

Pilates training is also a great way to improve balance. Standing exercises and Stability Ball work test balance and coordination. While seated on the Stability Ball, one can perform leg and arm movements that challenge core stability and simulate some of the movement patterns that are experienced in the saddle. Standing work on the Wunda Chair takes the balance challenge to new heights. Those heights can be a bit daunting at first, but the results are well worth the effort.

I believe that anyone who wants to bring their riding to the next level will benefit from the tools that Pilates training will give them. It's certainly made a huge difference for both me and my horse.



Colleen's Corner

Happy Anniversary, Whole Pilates! And what a lovely party we had.

Gratitude has definitely been a recurring theme over the past 2 years of newsletters, and this is no exception.

To celebrate Us, everyone whose come through these doors, taken a mat class, or just gave encouragement, received an invitation to our 1st ever party-type celebration of our existence. Whole Pilates is here because of you; because you wanted it and we wanted to be here. This is not lost on me, and to show my appreciation I wanted to gather as many of you as possible, who have come to mean so much to me, in one

(Continued from page 2)

place.

We started arriving at Wine in the Woods (216 Cahill Cross Rd in West Milford) at 7pm, and as we gathered in a cozy room filled with candles, comfy couches and fireplace, the feeling was of family and warm humor. Music was provided by the ever-omniscient iPod, and as more of us gathered we moved out to the patio to enjoy the comfortable evening.

A lovely wine tasting was hosted by Allen and Sheen, proprietors of WITW, and paired with amazing food catered by Highlands Gourmet (973-839-9766). Linda psychically appeared when ever anyone needed a glass or a plate filled.

Although Anita & I broke into a momentary bout of Cajun 2 Step, for the most part the evening was spent as many of our lessons are spent, enjoying each other's company, discussing and pondering, and lots of laughter.

To those who attended, and to those who couldn't for various reasons, thank you for coming, and being a part of this dream, Whole Pilates.



Photographs by Kylie Klempner



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Contacts and Credits:

To include yourself on our email list, or if you have questions or comments, write us at : colleen@wholepilates.com

Please go to our website, <http://www.WholePilates.com> to see what we've been working on, view archived newsletters, and streaming videos of the exercises, photo gallery, or to get the link for the Biofeedback game.

To install Adobe Acrobat, go to: <http://www.adobe.com/products/acrobat/readstep2.html>

Colleen Wenrich, RN, has been teaching wellness & fitness for over 20 years and is Certified Authentic Pilates, ACSM, AFAA, ACE and BCIA.