STRONG AND SUPPLE

Ride The Pilates Way

By Natalie Defee Mendik

DRESSAGE + PILATES = A NATURAL MATCH

"Pilates is strength, stretch, control." This catchphrase, common in Pilates teaching, parallels the fundamentals of dressage training.

"What do we want in our horses?" asks Janice Dulak, a popular clinician and author specializing in Pilates for dressage riders. "We want them to be strong, supple, and in control."

Understanding how a rider's lack of stability and control must feel for the horse to how we would feel walking a balance beam while wearing a backpack containing a live monkey, Dulak explains riders must learn to stabilize and "package" their bodies in order to ride with harmony. Think of the following, a secure seat complemented with independent hand and leg.

THE MAN BEHIND THE NAME

Sure, Pilates is a buzzword in the fitness world, but did you know this exercise form has been around for a century? Born in Germany in the late 1800s, Joseph Pilates' pursuit of physical fitness started as a means to overcome a sickly childhood and led to a lifetime devoted to developing a system of improving the human body, which he called "Contrology." A fascinating figure, Pilates fine-tuned his eponymous exercise philosophy while in an internment camp during World War I, later immigrating to the United States and founding a studio in New York City with his wife.

UNLEASH YOUR INNER ANIMAL

"Joseph Pilates was influenced by a lot of different things, but the part I like the most is that he observed how animals move," says Dulak. "He saw animals exercise their bodies through their spine. They arch their spine, round their spine—like the way a cat arches its back or a horse jumps and twists in the air. We are animals, we should also move from our spine."

Pilates' emphasis on working from a stabilized spine is different from most other workouts. To stabilize the spine, Pilates works the core muscles, which he called the "Powerhouse."

"Imagine a power station with wires extending to electric lines," remarks Dulak. "You create energy from your abs and glutes in the center of your body, and then send it out. That energy transfers through the spine down your arms and legs."

By using your Powerhouse, you can engage your muscles just as a dressage horse would. "We want the horse to lower the haunches, come through the back, and push off," says Dulak. "The energy from lowering the haunches and using abdominals through the back creates the energy to push off through the legs."

GIVE IT A TRY

So are you ready to discover your Powerhouse? It's all about how your body moves. "A shoulder in for a dressage horse is not just putting the legs in the correct footfall, the horse needs to be through his back and on the bit to do the exercise," notes Dulak. "It is the same with Pilates; if you just imitate where the arms and legs go, that is not Pilates. Pilates is how you stabilize your spine and use your abdominal and back muscles in balance while you move an arm or a leg."

Get your first taste of Pilates body control with Dulak's description of "The Wall" exercise:
Step 1:
Start by standing with your back and heels against the wall. You will notice you most likely have a curve in your lower back where your back does not touch the wall. "That's usually the tight lower back that causes stiffness in riders' hips," notes Dulak.

Pull your belly button back toward your back bone, feeling your core muscles press your spine back from the tailbone up to the midshoulders into the wall, much like a horse does when lifting the back up to come over the topline. You will probably need to walk your feet about six to eight inches away from the wall. Keep your knees with a slight bend at the kneecaps. Tighten your muscles at base of the pelvis, the area Dulak refers to as the "thru-trots"—where the thighs meet the buttocks. When the "thru-trots" and the core abdominal muscles are engaged, you will feel the front of the hips unlocking and stretching, and the spine opening even more.

Step 2:
In this position keeping the spine stable and your core and "thru-trots" engaged, challenge yourself by lifting your arms straight forward in front of you, parallel to the ground, painting your fingertips across the room. Be aware that as you lift your arms, your back may come off the wall; stabilize your spine with your abdominal wall. The "will show you whether or not you truly have an independent hand, and help you understand how to stabilize your spine while moving your arms as you must do when riding.

Step 3:
Step up your practice with squat exercises to see if you have independent legs. Still engaged and flush to the wall, walk your feet out about four inches farther from the wall. Press your heels into the ground, and bend your knees in line with your feet, sliding down the wall until your thighs are almost parallel to the ground. Squeeze your "thru-trots" as you straighten your legs to come up, keeping as much of your spine as possible against the wall. You should be able to feel how the movement of the legs might destabilize your spine.

Step 4:
Maintaining your position and "Powerhouse" engagement, combine the arm lift and squat exercises.

Hungry For More?
Are you ready to leave those loose limbs behind and take your riding to the next level? Check out Dulak’s book/CD set, Pilates for the Dressage Rider, as well as her new DVD set, Nine Pilates Essentials for the Balanced Rider: A Magic Circle Workout at dulakpilates.com. Based at the Dulak Pilates Center in Champaign, IL, Dulak is a certified Romana’s Pilates Master Instructor and creator of Pilates for Dressage.

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- JANICE DULAK

STAY STRONG, RIDE ON
A dressage friend of Dulak’s declared, “Pilates helps me control my moving parts.” In a nutshell, that’s exactly what Pilates achieves. “Most riders hold their spine with their back muscles—that’s what a horse does when he tenses the back and moves from the legs. We do the same—we tend to tense our backs and just move our arms and legs. This leads to a lot of tightness in the body as we try to control those moving parts with the wrong muscles,” says Dulak.

“Pilates literally trains the rider to stabilize the spine—not in a braced way, but in a way that allows our hips to open and close. Because in the end, that’s what you do to ride a horse—you stabilize your spine and you open and close your hips from hip flexion to hip extension to hip extension.”

As you develop body control, remember riding is an evolving process. “For all the frustrated riders out there, there is hope,” says Dulak. “I was a professional dancer and a Pilates teacher, yet found it difficult to sit the trot. I had the realization that you can learn how to use your body in a way that’s more conducive to progressing in riding than just trying to get more fit—it’s training the body. With this work I’ve taught so many people how to use their body more efficiently, and in the end their horses are much happier.”

Natalie DeFee Mendlik is an award-winning journalist specializing in equine media. Her personal horse passions include dressage and vaulting. Visit her online at MendlikMedia.com.

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