

PILATES BY HELEN FLETCHER

Re-educate your riding with Pilates

PILATES IS AN EFFECTIVE cross training method that has many benefits to offer the serious equestrian. Balance, flexibility, muscle symmetry, posture and strength are all improved with regular Pilates practice. When we become aware of how our bodies affect our horses, it is logical that if we want to improve our horse's performance, we need to focus on our own bodies. The ability to move well improves our ability to ride well. A healthily functioning body translates well onto the horse and improves everything from the aids to a truly independent seat – the key to effective riding. This understanding and deeper knowledge also improves our ability to communicate with our horses, developing focus, sensitivity and “feel”, all of which create a more effective rider and therefore improve the horse's performance.

As riders, we need a strong, dynamically stabilised centre, evenly balanced strength and flexibility on both sides of the body, and a well aligned spine, pelvis and shoulder girdle. To have softness, fluidity and ease of movement, a rider needs strength but not rigidity. We need to follow the motion of the horse, but we are also required to have the strength to influence the horse's movement. Stability is essentially about controlled, efficient movement. Regular Pilates practice improves this on a conscious and unconscious level, without building bulky muscles that inhibit our movement. A dynamically stabilised centre lengthens and supports the spine, allowing the limbs to move independently. This is fundamentally the independent seat.

AS RIDERS, WE NEED A STRONG, DYNAMICALLY STABILISED CENTRE, EVENLY BALANCED STRENGTH AND FLEXIBILITY ON BOTH SIDES OF THE BODY

Pilates is suitable for all disciplines and levels of rider, from beginners who lack central stability and balance, to seasoned performers who use Pilates to keep their bodies finely tuned, released and mobile, strong and functional, to be able to continue to ride at the level that they want. Some of the best riders in the world are using Pilates to effectively cross train. Put simply, Pilates enables you to ride better, longer.

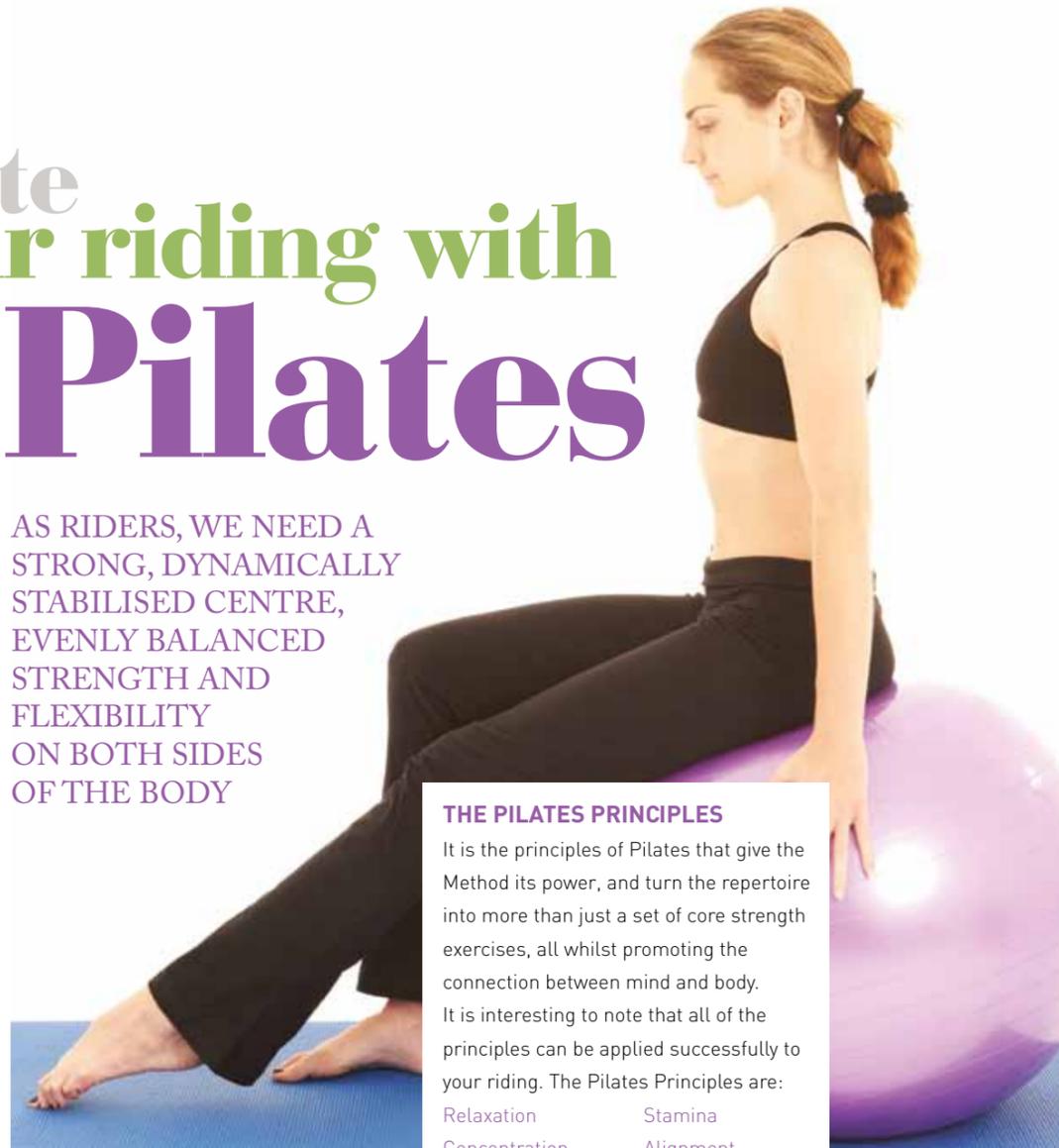
As you work through the basic exercises keep all of these principles in mind, they are placed in the order in which you layer them throughout your workout, and it is important to

THE PILATES PRINCIPLES

It is the principles of Pilates that give the Method its power, and turn the repertoire into more than just a set of core strength exercises, all whilst promoting the connection between mind and body. It is interesting to note that all of the principles can be applied successfully to your riding. The Pilates Principles are:

Relaxation	Stamina
Concentration	Alignment
Breathing	Centring
Coordination	Control
Flowing movement	

note that you cannot fully achieve one without the other. Relaxation leads to greater concentration, which allows you to be more aware of your alignment. Through better alignment our breathing is more efficient. Most of the muscles involved in breathing are also involved in stability, making centring easier to achieve, which in turn allows more efficient coordination and flowing movement. All of which, when practiced regularly, build stamina.



THE FUNDAMENTALS OF PILATES: CENTRING, ALIGNMENT AND BREATHING...

CENTRING

During movement there are many muscles working together. Agonists and antagonists mobilise and are known as “global muscles”. Synergists and fixators stabilise and are known as “local muscles”. The local muscles lie deep within the body and stabilise the joints by holding them in place. The global muscles orientate and move the spine and limbs and are responsible for larger movements. Effective riding requires a stable seat. The local muscles that make up our central stability and enable us to have a more stable and effective seat are:

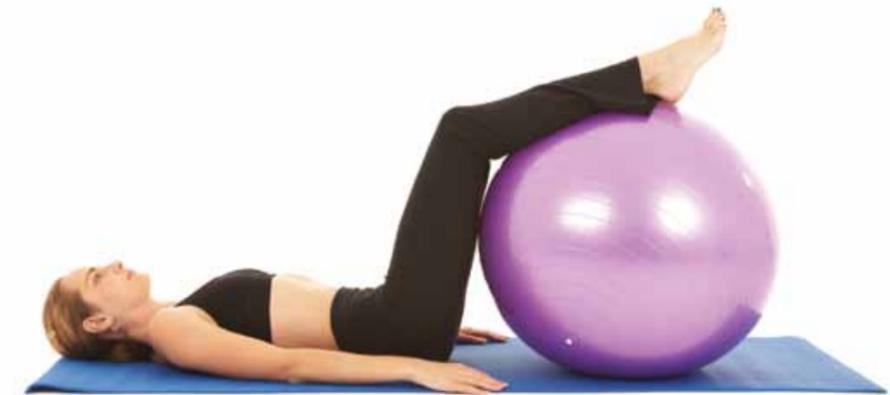
- **Transversus Abdominus** – known as TrA
- **Pelvic floor muscles** – these attach under the pelvis like a sling from pubic bone to coccyx
- **Deep fibres of Lumbar Multifidus** – small muscles located deep in the lower back
- **Diaphragm** (diagram with labels to be inserted)

The deepest of our four abdominal layers, the TrA wraps around the spine like a corset. Working in conjunction with the deep fibres of the Lumbar Multifidus, the pelvic floor muscles, and the diaphragm, these together create a solid cylinder of protection and support that strengthens and stabilises the spine and helps to prevent injury.

This stable centre allows our limbs to move independently. This is known as disassociation. For example, when our seat is quiet and moving with the rhythm of the horse, and we execute a leg aid, we are disassociating the leg from the pelvis. The leg is moving but it is not affecting our position in any way. This is only possible if we have good central stability.

When riding, we want the local muscles to be actively supporting us without having to think about it. Pilates practice off the horse conditions our muscles and increases their strength and stamina. There

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are times we need to actively engage a little deeper during more complex movements, for example, half halts, lateral work, or transitions. It is important to know that we can and should vary the degree to which we recruit these muscles. I like the analogy of the dimmer switch that is constantly being adjusted to suit the requirement that is being placed on the body. Overdoing this recruitment leads to rigidity that blocks the flow of movement in the rider and therefore in the horse. For efficiency, it is important to do only what is required, no more and no less.

When learning Pilates we start with the very basics of activating the local muscles and then move on to simple repertoire that teaches hip and shoulder disassociation and spinal articulation. Once the simple exercises have been mastered more difficult exercises and movements can be layered on top. As with all training, a good solid foundation is the best place to start. Remember to be patient with yourself as you learn the concepts.

ALIGNMENT

Alignment is one of the most important principles of Pilates. If our bodies are constantly out of good alignment, strain is placed on our joints, ligaments and muscles, impacting detrimentally on joint health and how we move. Our joints have potential for many variations of movement. When our everyday activities only use a small amount of this potential and are also repetitive, joint health can be compromised. As riders we tend to move in a small range, and over time our muscles and ligaments tighten and reduce our mobility. Pilates mobilises and stretches as it lengthens and strengthens, developing an even balance of strength and flexibility around the joints, creating good functional movement patterns and imprinting them into the muscle memory.

Neutral pelvis, spine and shoulder positions align our joints to reduce wear and tear and allow for more effective isolation of the local (deep stabilising) muscles from the global (moving) muscles. This isolation and then recruitment of these muscles improves spinal stability and

THE FUNDAMENTALS OF PILATES: CENTRING, ALIGNMENT AND BREATHING CONTINUED...

alignment. Therefore our ability to balance our head, rib cage and pelvis centrally over one another is made easier, both on and off the horse, resulting in improved posture and functional dynamic stability. When riding, our pelvis needs to be able to move in all four planes (directions) to follow the movement of the horse. This movement, coming up from underneath, can be absorbed more effectively if all of our joints are in their neutral positions allowing us to move in rhythm with, and not block, the horse's movement. Although we move out of neutral at times when riding, it is always a base that we return to.

BREATHING

In Pilates each movement is accompanied by a conscious breath pattern which is used to assist, challenge, release, or energise our practise. The breath connects the mind to the body. Good breathing technique enhances our life and is an important principle of the Method, enabling our muscles to work optimally, assisting in relaxation and the release of tension, improving circulation, encouraging fluidity of movement, and improving focus and awareness.

Almost all of the muscles involved in breathing have a postural function. The diaphragm plays an integral part as it corresponds directly with the TrA. Pilates uses the technique of lateral breathing, where the breath is directed into the back and sides of the rib cage, allowing the abdominal muscles to be engaged and contracted during both the inhalation and the exhalation. This breathing technique helps to centrally stabilise the trunk and improve and maintain posture, again both on and off the horse.

It is worth taking the time and making the commitment to develop an aware and mindful approach to movement. Pilates is essentially a form of movement re-education. It gives us the means to correct our postural

PILATES IS ESSENTIALLY A FORM OF MOVEMENT RE-EDUCATION. IT GIVES US THE MEANS TO CORRECT OUR POSTURAL IMBALANCES AND MUSCULAR ASYMMETRIES, ELEVATING OUR RIDING TO ANOTHER LEVEL



imbalances and muscular asymmetries, elevating our riding to another level, taking us over time to a state of balance, emotionally and physically, to equipoise.

We all know the importance of "eyes on the ground". Regardless of our level of riding experience, a good instructor is invaluable. The same can be said of Pilates – nothing takes the place of personalised instruction and a thorough postural analysis, with a program developed to meet your needs. Ideally, this would involve postural analysis both on and off the horse, by a specialist equestrian Pilates instructor. When sourcing a Pilates instructor always make sure that they have adequate qualifications and experience,

and are a member of a recognised organisation such as the Australian Pilates Method Association (APMA), the Pilates Alliance, or the Australian Physiotherapy Association. **EQ**

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ALIGNMENT	BREATHING	CENTRING
<p>NEUTRAL SPINE AND PELVIS – STANDING Good standing posture is a dynamic exercise working all the deep postural muscles.</p>	<p>LATERAL BREATHING - SEATED OR STANDING Sit or stand tall with your feet hip width apart. Wrap a scarf or stretch band around your lower ribs. Cross it over at the front, holding the opposite ends. Make sure it is firm but not tight.</p>	<p>CENTRING – STANDING, SEATED OR SEMI-SUPINE From a seated, standing or semi supine position, check that you are in neutral spine and pelvic alignment.</p>
<p>Stand with your feet parallel and hip width apart. Relax your arms down by your sides.</p>	<p>Breathe in through your nose, focussing on the back and sides of your rib cage. The lungs will expand and your rib cage will widen.</p>	<p>Take a lateral preparation breath, into the back and sides of the rib cage.</p>
<p>Feel your feet on the floor and focus on three points: the base of the big toe, the base of the little toe, and the centre of the heel. Make sure that you have an even pressure on all three points.</p>	<p>You should feel the scarf/band tighten as the rib cage expands laterally. As you breathe out fully, through soft lips and a relaxed jaw, the rib cage will soften and relax towards your hips.</p>	<p>As you breathe out, gently engage your pelvic floor muscles and hollow your lower abdominals towards your spine, without moving out of your neutral position.</p>
<p>Lengthen your legs without locking your knees.</p>	<p>Be aware not to over breathe, as you develop an awareness of the expansion and contraction of the rib cage.</p>	<p>The exhalation allows an easier activation of the deep abdominals, which we then maintain during the next inhalation.</p>
<p>Place your hands on the front of your pelvis, the heel of your hands on your hip bones and your fingers on your pubic bone. Check that the pubic bone is on the same plane as the hip bones. Your tail bone should feel lengthened and your hips should feel open.</p>	<p>LATERAL BREATHING – SEMI SUPINE Lie on your back with knees bent and feet hip width apart. Your spine and pelvis should be in a neutral position.</p>	<p>This hollowing activates your Transverses Abdominus. Maintain this activation as you continue your lateral breathing, softening your jaw and lips to avoid creating tension.</p>
<p>Gently hollow your abdominals towards your spine, just as if you were zipping up a tight pair of pants. As you do this, think of lengthening both sides of your waist.</p>	<p>Place your hands on the sides of your lower ribs, with your elbows out to the sides.</p>	<p>SINGLE LEG FLOAT Having established correct alignment, breathing and centring we can progress to some basic stability exercises that will lay the foundation for more complex Pilates movement and repertoire. These work the deep abdominals and teach pelvic stability and hip disassociation. In the Single Leg Float, the pelvis needs to stay stable and feel heavy and grounded on the floor, whilst the legs float as light as feathers. This oppositional imagery helps with the concept of disassociation.</p>
<p>Check that your rib cage and head are positioned directly and centrally above your pelvis.</p>	<p>Breathe in through your nose, focussing on the back and sides of your rib cage. The lungs will expand and your rib cage will widen.</p>	<p>From the semi-supine neutral position, take a breath in as a preparation to move. Breathe out as you engage your pelvic floor and gently hollow your abdominals towards your spine, as you lift one foot off the floor, floating it to 90 degrees.</p>
<p>Lengthen your collar bones and feel your shoulder blades flatten and broaden across your back.</p>	<p>As you breathe out fully, through soft lips and a relaxed jaw, the rib cage will soften and relax towards your hips.</p>	<p>Maintain the weight in the back of the pelvis as the leg floats upward.</p>
<p>NEUTRAL SPINE AND PELVIS – SEMI SUPINE Lie on your back on a mat, knees bent at 90 degrees and feet flat on the floor, hip width apart.</p>	<p>Be aware not to over breathe, as you develop an awareness of the expansion and contraction of the rib cage.</p>	<p>Breathe in, maintaining your abdominal hollowing, breathing out as you float the foot back to the floor.</p>
<p>Maintaining the natural curves of your neck, relax your jaw. You may need to place a towel under your head for comfort.</p>	<p>BE AWARE NOT TO OVER BREATHE, AS YOU DEVELOP AN AWARENESS OF THE EXPANSION AND CONTRACTION OF THE RIB CAGE</p>	<p>Repeat this movement with the other leg.</p>
<p>Feel the weight of the back of your head, the back of your rib cage and the back of your pelvis. Your lower spine should maintain its natural curve and have less contact with the mat.</p>	<p>Place the heel of your hands on your hip bones and your finger tips on the pubic bone. These three points need to be on the same plane to place you in a neutral pelvic position. Imagine placing a glass of water on the plane created between these three points. The water should be level. This is your neutral pelvis and spine.</p>	<p>Alternating legs, repeat the single leg float 10 times.</p>

