

Finding —the— Sweet Spot

By Elizabeth Hanson, author of *Equestrian Pilates: An Owner's Manual for the Equestrian Body*

Every rider searches for that ideal moment when everything comes together and horse and rider are moving in perfect coordination and balance. It is a magical place to be and it starts in the “sweet spot” on your horse’s back.

Riding Posture

MANY PEOPLE NEW TO GAITED HORSES mistakenly believe that they require less riding skill than other types of riding. No matter what style of riding you prefer, your movements, intentional or not, affect the movement of the horse and your long-term riding health. A rider who is unfit or unaware of his or her movement will only get small glimpses of the “sweet spot”.

The ideal is to stay relaxed while keeping your ear, shoulder, hip and heel in line, with equal weight distribution, and to be aware when you are in or out of this position. This position gives the rider the best opportunity to stay in the “sweet spot” of the horse’s back, allowing a free and natural gait. For many, sitting on the horse with a straight, elegant posture is difficult. Some riders have trouble maintaining this posture, especially during movement. Addressing that difficulty may well lead to improvement in all aspects of riding performance.

Some riders believe that leaning or sitting back on a gaited horse helps it to gait properly. This position puts the rider’s upper body weight too far back and often, to

compensate for this, the lower half of the body must stay in a chair-like position with the knees bent and the legs and feet in front of the hips. Another common posture problem is slouching in the upper body and shoulders, pitching the rider’s body weight forward. This problem may also manifest as the rider sliding the lower leg too far back, rendering the legs less effective or “hanging on the reins” to use the horse’s body for balance. This position puts the rider’s shoulders in front of the hips and places more weight on the horse’s forehead.

Sometimes these postures are intentional to compensate for imbalance or to try to allow the horse more freedom of movement. But they are short-term solutions that can lead to long-term problems. Unequal muscle use builds body imbalances that cause neck and low back pain and posture problems that may transfer to the ground. In addition, these positions actually unbalance the rider and make it more difficult for the rider to move with the horse and more challenging for the horse to move and gait its best.

Muscle Awareness

THE REAL SOLUTION IS TO DEVELOP awareness of, activate and train the proper muscles to maintain a relaxed posture that places us in the best position for us, and the horse. This requires the use of muscles not commonly addressed

We tend to develop and over use

certain muscles while neglecting others. The leg, arm and back muscles, for example, are commonly over-used. The deep core supporting muscles are often neglected. Imbalances, over-use and inflexibility in our muscles lead to many of the typical problems related to riding, such as low back pain (often not even from the ride itself but from related chores, even those we love mucking out stalls), difficulty in maintaining proper positions during various gaits, head bobbing, and many others.

The answer is to train other muscles so that those commonly used muscles can be assisted and supported. The muscles that can do this are what Pilates calls the core muscles. Core muscles are the strong, deep muscles of the back and trunk that provide a girdle of support for the body and a power-assist for all other muscles. For the rider these core muscles also include some of the deep muscles of the upper trunk, which can take pressure off of the arm and shoulder muscles.

The inability to stay relaxed while in proper posture is often caused by a tight upper and lower back, a tense neck, overuse of the arms muscles and under use of the core and seat.

We can address that in four simple ways:

- 1) build strength in the proper muscles,
- 2) develop balance side-to-side, front-to-back and inside-to-outside,
- 3) develop flexibility,



4) increase awareness of how we are using or not using our muscles. Let's look at each of these elements.

Strength

Strength provides the base for proper posture and movement.

Strength does not mean huge arms and "six-pack abs". A rider needs *functional strength*. Functional strength is strength sufficient for the needs of the sport, in the right places, in the correct balance and with a proper degree of flexibility. Having tremendously strong arms, for example, may actually unbalance the rider. Overusing the arms causes more weight to be carried in the upper body. Weight carried there often causes the horse to shift his weight forward, unbalancing his

more circulation, meaning there is less soreness and cramping and less chance of injury.

The prime area of flexibility focus for posture maintenance is in the legs and low back.

Balance

Balance allows proper use of strength and flexibility.

When the body is balanced the rider can sit tall in the saddle, without tipping forward, backward or to the side. If the upper body is not balanced over the hips and seat, the rider is more likely to grip with the knees or hang on to the reins to maintain balance. This restricts the horse's frame causing both horse and rider to be further unbalanced.

Balance also refers to balance

For posture challenges, the balance between core muscles and the exterior muscles is essential, as is balance between the muscles that pull the pelvis forward and those that push it back.

Awareness

Awareness allows us to apply strength, flexibility and balance.

Awareness is the necessary ingredient in showing the body which movements are the desired ones. Noticing and remembering the feel of correct positioning allows it to be replicated. This is muscle memory. Muscle memory frees the rider to move more easily by letting actions occur without thinking about them. Awareness also allows the rider to visualize correct actions making them easier for the body to achieve. This begins the creation of a strong mind-body connection. When the mind and body work in unison, the body performs any task with the least effort and energy.

Until the rider develops new patterns of muscular activity there is a tendency for the body to revert to the patterns it has developed over time. Awareness allows you to constantly monitor action until new patterns are developed.

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movement.

The most important area of strength for proper posture is in the core muscles supporting the low back, abdomen and trunk to allow the rider to sit upright.

Flexibility

Flexibility is enhanced by core strength taking pressure off the back and leg muscles.

Flexible muscles and joints give the body the ability to move freely and easily both on and off the horse.

Staying as flexible as possible relaxes the muscles and gives the body freedom to move in the desired ways and maintain posture during movement. Flexibility also helps prevent injury and extends longevity of the riding life. Many riders are plagued by lower back and neck problems. Flexible, balanced bodies are able to spread the stress of riding over the entire body and more easily absorb the horse's movement. Flexible muscles recover more easily from the rigors of a ride and allow

within riding aids. Tightness in the hamstrings compromises balance with the front of the legs, the quadriceps. That often leads to soreness in the legs due to overuse of one system of muscles. This is true for any muscle pairs that have opposite actions.

Finding Your Core Muscles

The *power of Pilates* is in absolute attention to form and awareness, not on the amount of weight moved or the number of reps done.

Before beginning we must be aware of the core and how to activate it. The core is the starting point for great riding because your strength must be centered there, your balance is dependant on that foundation and flexibility revolves around that stable base you are going to create.

The core is the shock absorber, protective wrap and power source. It deflects the motion of the hip as it follows the horse's motion and assists with all equestrian movements. Core stability prevents collapsing, twisting, bouncing, or bobbing the rest of the body. It also lets the rider work from their center so the horse will do the same. When the core is stabilized many parts of the body find their natural place and gain range and flexibility.

For this exercise we will just have you activate one of the main core muscles. To find it, place your hand on your belly button and cough deeply. The muscles that you feel are part of the core. To engage these deep centering muscles, pull the navel in towards the spine and slightly upward at about 30% of your tightest squeeze.



Common Mistake: Do not lean into your hip to stay balanced.

Common Mistake: As you circle your leg avoid leaning back to stay balanced.

Putting it All Together

The goal of Equestrian Pilates is to teach awareness of movement and then condition the body to move effectively while riding.

When the foundations which we are talking about, flexibility, strength, balance, awareness and core support are mastered, the effects are profound and far-reaching. This type of program will affect every part of your ride.

The goal of Equestrian Pilates is to build strength, flexibility, balance and awareness.

It will improve performance, make your ride easier, make the ride more fun, take the stress out of long, hard rides and keep you healthier. It will also give you a better horse. Many of the riding difficulties that are assigned to the horse disappear when the rider's body is strong, flexible and balanced. And maybe equally important, you will have fewer aches and pains when you are off the horse and out of the barn.

(Though why you would want to be out of the barn is anyone's guess.)

Let's look at one simple Equestrian Pilates exercise that can start you on the way to strength, flexibility and balance in the supporting core muscles. Pay close attention to form. There is no hurry. (You have to learn to walk before you running walk, rack or largo!)

Standing Single Leg Circles

Goal - Learn, by moving from your core, to lift and rotate your leg without rocking back and forth in the pelvis. This exercise gives mobility to the hip socket, strengthens the core, and builds your ability to separate the movement of your spine and pelvis from that of your hips and legs.

Application to Riding - This exercise will increase strength, flexibility and balance in the legs, making it easier to keep the shoulder, leg and heel in line. Learning how to move your legs from your center teaches you how to use your legs without creating unnecessary movement in the rest of your body, teaches you how to reach your leg long from the hip, allows you to cue your horse more effectively with your legs, helps you maintain better posture and balance in the saddle, and use your seat without disturbing your legs. Standing rather than lying down while doing this exercise challenges your body's ability to balance itself - a skill that is extremely important when seated on moving horse.

Position - Stand with your feet shoulder width apart with your hands on your hips. If it is challenging for you to balance on one leg stand, next to something that you can hold onto to maintain your balance.

Movement

◆ Inhale through your nose. As you exhale through your mouth pull



The Correct Position: Stand tall with parallel hips as you circle your leg.

your navel in towards your spine at 30% of your tightest squeeze to activate your core. Use your stomach muscles this way throughout the exercise.

- ◆ Inhale through your nose. Exhale and lift your right leg 6 inches off the floor. Flex your foot.
- ◆ Inhale and start to circle your right leg counter clock-wise.
- ◆ Exhale through the mouth and complete your circle.
- ◆ Repeat 7 times.
- ◆ Reverse and make 8 clockwise circles.
- ◆ Switch legs and repeat 8 times in each direction.

What to Notice - Focus your attention on the contraction of the stomach muscles. Visualize your toe being attached to your belly button and move your leg from your stomach. Make your circles as big as you can while keeping your balance and keeping your pelvis still. Notice if your hips rock back and forth while you circle your legs. If this happens make your circles smaller and focus more on the contraction of your core muscles (don't grip or tense your muscles) to control your movement. Be sure you stand up straight and keep your hips parallel; it can be tempting to lean into your supporting leg.

Build a strong, balanced, flexible body that meets the functional requirements of the rider and amazing results happen in the saddle. It can truly be sweet!

About the Author

Elizabeth Hanson, whose best friend as a child was a racking horse name APRIL JUBILEE, is the founder and developer of Equestrian Pilates.



Elizabeth Hanson with her horse, Gober.

Elizabeth does clinics to teach riders how to get the most from their ride and their horse while staying healthy. She conducts clinics of both of-the-horse classes in Equestrian Pilates and on-the-horse evaluations to see exactly where your body needs assistance. Her book entitled Equestrian Pilates: An Owner's Manual for the Equestrian Body is currently available as an e-book. (See Review, Summer 05.)

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