



Rider Focus

Equibalance with Julie Leiken

Introducing a series of articles that will transform you into a lean, strong riding machine.

The equation of riding seems deceptively simple on first glance. Take one horse, add one rider, put them together and you are supposed to get harmonious, magical movement, right? Well, for those of us who have been working hard to become the best horseman we can be, we know that adding horse and rider is not just a matter of simple addition but borders on advanced calculus. We spend a lot of time focused on the horse part of the equation "My horse won't take his right lead," "My horse drops his shoulder," "My horse can only open a gate on one side." However, he is only half of the picture, and if we could turn that critical eye on ourselves and our own quality of movement, we might begin to understand why our horse does what he does and to be thankful that he can't speak so critically of us.

We have an arsenal of exercises and patterns designed to make our horses more supple and strong, but what do we have for ourselves? We analyze the stiffness and braces from one side to the next on our horses, but what do we do for our weak sides? Pilates is a system of lengthening and strengthening the body, designed to make you supple and strong and move with balance and grace. For someone who rides, Julie Leiken describes Pilates as "dressage for the human." She teaches riders of all levels how to use their bodies in the same way they would like their horses to use theirs.

How She Got Started

"Personally," says Julie "I was so frustrated in my own riding. I would work with an instructor and they would tell me to change something in my body, like more leg or shift your weight, and I would think that I was doing it, but nothing would happen because I didn't

really have an understanding of how the body works."

Julie spent 10 years in Germany, riding and learning to teach dressage. Back in the states, her sister suffered from an injury and began taking Pilates classes from Pat Guyton, a Ron Fletcher Master Teacher, as part of her rehabilitation. During a visit, she went with her sister to a class and got very excited about the applications of Pilates for riders.

"When I started doing Pilates and putting it together I started really working on the places that I know that I am weak," says Julie. "I want to work to balance that out in my riding so that I can work to balance my horse. My horse has inconsistencies the same way I have inconsistencies in my body. Because I understand what they are and I'm able to work on them, I'm able to help my horse so much more. I can help him to move straight, to move forward, to be more balanced in his body, all because I'm finding more balance in my body. It's helped me a lot, and that's what I want to help other riders with."

She completed a Ron Fletcher Program of Study™, a two-year course taught by Ron Fletcher, a master teacher who was a Martha Graham Dancer and who studied with Joseph Pilates himself. (For more information please visit www.ronfletcherwork.com) After completing this education, Julie began combining her experience teaching dressage with her new knowledge of Pilates and began working with riders of all disciplines. She has also been involved in the beginning stages of Betsy Steiner's Equilates™ Program.

The Purpose of This Series

"I teach Pilates and I ride it. I am tired of reading articles and books where people have these wonderful things to say about why your horse is the way he

is. They will show you and tell you what you are doing wrong, but no one ever really sits down and says, 'Here is your problem, and let me give you these exercises to help you.' Just the knowledge of what is wrong is frustrating; you have to have something that you can do about it. What good is the knowledge that something is weak without the ability to make it strong?"

The purpose of this series of articles is to give you ways to evaluate your own strengths and weaknesses and to then address those areas with specific exercises that will help your riding (and your movement in general).

By first developing an awareness of how your body works, you can then develop your ability to use it to help your horse use his body in a more efficient way. This series will give you ways to help you help your horse.

But I'm Just a Trail Rider

Many of us might be able to see the dressage-Pilates connection, but what about those of us who "just trail ride"? Does it make a difference if we are using our own bodies well?

"If you are a trail rider, you have to get through difficult situations and ride with some technique just like everyone else," says Julie. "You need to first of all be able to stay on your horse. When he spooks at a new object in his path or going up and down hills, you need to be able to stay in the saddle and be comfortable. The more you can work on your own body and the more you can work on balancing it and getting stronger, the more confident you are going to be on your trail ride, the more comfortable you are going to sit on your horse; the more balanced your horse is going to be. If you are riding for four hours and you always sit on your right seat bone and you collapse in your left

waist, your horse is sitting underneath that for all that time. He will start to come up a little bit sore; your imbalance will start to affect the movement of his body.

“Most times someone comes to me because they are having problems with their horse or they just want to help their horse. We start to work a little bit, and I point out a couple of things on their body that the average person wouldn't notice. Once a client starts to realize that they carry their shoulders up around their ears not only while they are riding, but at their desk job, while they are driving, when they sleep at night, and they always have this shoulder pain or back pain, they start to realize that it's a life-changing experience. It's not just about the horse. You start to have an awareness of how you move and how your body moves.”

Ron Fletcher Cues

Julie studied Pilates under Ron Fletcher, who worked directly with Joseph Pilates. In his system of teaching he breaks down the basics of Pilates into seven cues. This series of articles will also be broken down according to those cues, explaining areas of common weakness, proper function and specific exercises to create strength and balance.

Part 1: Feet

“We start at the feet, and if we think about how much time we spend on our horse's feet, compare that to the amount of time we spend thinking about our own feet,” says Julie. “They are how you balance, and if you're not balanced properly over the feet in your stirrup, then you're not balanced properly anywhere, on your horse, because your leg cannot hang correctly.”

Part 2: Magnets

“Magnets go from ankle bone to ankle bone, right above the knee, then way up high in the inner thigh,” says Julie. “Sitting on the horse, you always want to feel this attraction pulling toward each other. The magnets help your leg to fall properly from your hip down into your feet and to keep your leg on and to put your leg on separately as it needs to be.”

Part 3: Bolts

“Think of two pairs of imaginary

bolts,” says Julie, “one set running from your hips straight inward toward the center of your pelvis. Then a second set running from right above your pubic bone and right above your sacrum again straight inward toward the center of your pelvis. These bolts help to orient you while riding and walking. You want your bolts to be level. If they aren't something is off.”

Part 4: The Core/ Girdle of Strength

“This is the first thing you think of when you think of Pilates,” says Julie. “And for riders, it's the way you collect your horse. Imagine your horse's stomach. When you ask your horse to use himself correctly, you actually ask him to pull his stomach up and lengthen his back to round, which is exactly what we would like to do to use our core. If you imagine the muscle that surrounds the five vertebrae of our torso as a corset, what we want to do is strengthen it and lengthen it so that it supports the spine. For the rider, that means it creates the support you need to sit quietly in the saddle and allow your lower back to move freely underneath you.”

Part 5: Breathing

“For a rider it is so important to learn to breathe into your back and into your ribs,” says Julie. “You can learn to use your breath to strengthen your core. Riders tend not to breathe; they get really tight in their upper back and in their shoulders because they are not breathing, and so I do a lot of work with breathing just so you can find a rhythm to help to strengthen the core and to open the chest.”

Part 6: Anchoring the Shoulders

“Riders tend to have rounded shoulders,” says Julie. “When you round your shoulders, you put your weight forward and tend to have a heavier hand, so in Pilates we work on bringing the scapula together and down in the back and strengthening the muscles that run in between the scapula and underneath it in order to give a solid support for the arms. Your scapula and your shoulder girdle stay in place and your



arm moves freely so that you can give and take on the reins, you can open the reins, and you never change the upper body. It's a lot of strengthening. Plus it makes you look a lot better.”

Part 7: Head and Neck

“When the shoulders are rounded forward, the tendency is that the head is forward, same as on a horse,” says Julie. “The head is the heaviest part of the body. If our head is forward, our neck is contracted in the back, and lengthened and weak in the front—same as on our horse. We have a ewe-neck. We don't want the ewe-neck in our horse; we don't want the ewe-neck in our body, so we do a lot of work strengthening the neck by lengthening the back of it and strengthening the front of it, finding the center. We make sure that it sits directly on top of the spine so that we can balance our weight better so our horse can balance his weight better to keep himself off the forehead.”

*For more
information:*

Julie Leiken's Web Site
www.julieleiken.com

Ron Fletcher's Web Site
www.ronfletcherwork.com

More on the History of Pilates
www.pilates.com/history.html