PILATES FOR RIDERS

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Before building core strength, Lindsay Wilcox-Reid explains how to relax the muscles that get in the way

In the previous issue I explained how your form (what your body looks like) and your function (how your body actually works biomechanically) affect your riding. They determine how you sit on your horse, how well your body can follow all the oscillations of his back in each pace, and how well you can apply and cease aids. They also determine how efficiently you can absorb his movement without strain and how well you can stay balanced whilst resisting any unwanted movement forces like a spook or buck. I call this core stability.

Restrictions in normal movement of your pelvis can affect the efficiency of your core, the current buzzword in the equestrian world.

Pilates as an exercise form is a phenomenal complementary discipline to riding. It shares very similar goals and principles of awareness, control of mind and body, and concentration. Some people find Pilates or similar techniques unhelpful. This is often because they are starting these programmes whilst there is dysfunction already present. I am going to look at preparatory exercises designed to be used before starting core stability or strength training, which will help your body to become intrinsically, biomechanically sound. Typically people start core stability type exercises when they are simply not ready.

These exercises help to reduce low grade muscle spasm which, when present, prevents normal movement in the pelvis. If muscles around your pelvis and hip joint go into spasm, which is really very common, it can wreak havoc on your position which has a marked effect on your ability to maintain a following, elastic contact.

If you struggle with tilts and twists in your position, it is likely that your intrinsic biomechanics could do with some help!

The term 'spasm' here, doesn't mean the sudden intense pain. I am referring to gradual muscle spasm that builds up in a muscle that is protecting a vulnerable area. You won't necessarily feel or be aware of this low grade spasm at all.

Muscles that are stuck in this state of spasm become dysfunctional because not only do they struggle to relax but they can't use their full power capacity either.

Picture 1: Leg press sitting Leg Press for gluteus maximus anti-spasm. If this pulls your shoulders, try it lying down instead

Picture 2: Leg press lying

Picture 3: 4-sign seated

Picture 4: 4-sign lying

If it feels uncomfortable to do this seated, try it lying down. You can do this even in bed!

The anti-spasm exercises given here help the 'relax' message to get through. When a muscle is in this type of spasm it is much more sensible to apply anti-spasm exercises than stretches. Imagine a rope with a knot in it. The rope is like a muscle, the knot like the spasm. Stretching the muscle is akin to pulling either end of the rope and making the knot tighter. Anti-spasm exercises allow you to undo the knot.

As a Biomechanics Coach™, I use these exercises with my clients to identify restrictions within the body every time I see them. Anti-spasm exercises can be useful for up to six weeks from when you start to use them. Practise them three or four times a day during this period. After this time, stretches and then muscle conditioning are likely to be of greater benefit. I would recommend doing anti-spasm exercises before you ride in order to maximise your joint mobility. They are a useful tool to integrate into your pre-ride warm up on a permanent basis, as it only takes a sudden spook, buck or jolt to knock your suspension system (the muscles around your hips and pelvis) out of balance. The better your alignment and the more conditioned you are the less likely this is to happen.

ANTI-SPASM EXERCISES

1. Leg press exercise for the gluteus maximus, the big bottom muscles!

Sit with your legs about hip-width apart. Lift your left knee up towards your chest and clasp your hands behind your thigh to support the weight. Using only 20% of your maximum possible effort, press your thigh downwards into your hands without allowing your hands to be moved. Hold this low-level isometric (static) contraction for 20 seconds.

Let the leg go and place your foot on the floor for a few seconds, then lift your leg again and repeat the exercise for three more sets of 20 seconds. Remember, it is important to only use around 20% of your maximum possible muscular effort; using more will not make it work better!

Now repeat, this time pressing your right thigh into your hands.

To find your 20%, first press as hard as you can, to find your 100% effort level. Then only use about half this pressure; this will be your 50%. Then use approximately half that to find around 20%. It will probably feel a little bit more than just the weight of your leg.

2. 4-Sign exercise for the piriformis, the niggly muscles at the side of your hips.

Sit with your legs about hip-width apart. You can do this in any seat or chair; whilst watching the telly is a perfect opportunity. Cross your right ankle over your left thigh just above your knee. Using only 20% of your maximum possible effort, press your ankle into your thigh as if you were trying to move it to the right, but without actually doing so. If you are doing this correctly you will be pivoting around your right hip and so your right knee should want to lift as you press your right ankle down against your immovable left thigh. So, to prevent this happening and to ensure it is a static contraction where no movement takes place, put your hand on top of your right knee. It can help to think of pushing your knee up into your hand, without allowing your hand to be moved. Hold this isometric contraction for 20 seconds.

Release the pressure, place your foot on the floor for a few seconds, return to the starting position and repeat for three more sets of 20 seconds (four in total).

Now repeat all four sets of 20 seconds each, this time crossing your left ankle over your right thigh.

Awareness and improvement of your alignment and weight distribution (form) assists your horse in developing his balance and carriage. Ensuring your body is also intrinsically aligned allows the mechanisms within, which are responsible for maintaining symmetry, dynamic stability and efficient shock absorption, to work correctly. Horses are so sensitive to changes in a rider's biomechanics that working on both can revolutionise your riding.

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