



# Six Minutes to Better Rider Fitness

Try this Pilates sequence to awaken and strengthen deep core stabilizers, improve muscular asymmetries, mobilize joints and supple the spine.

By *Helen Fletcher*

In the world of elite sport, cross-training and fitness are an integral part of a competitor's routine. Dressage riders from amateur to elite competitors are one-half of the athletic combination, and as riders, we need to look at our own body and its ability to not only withstand the rigors of competitive riding but to complement and enhance the horse's abilities and athleticism.

We need to be mindful of our asymmetries, weaknesses, postural restrictions and compensatory patterns and continually strive to be the best we can be to become, or remain, the athletic equivalent of our horses. We all have busy lives and sometimes looking after our own fitness comes

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second to the care and fitness needs of our horses. What cannot be underestimated, though, is the cumulative benefits that a small amount of effective, mindful movement each day can have to improve our riding and our riding longevity.

We are what we habitually do, and I have designed this sequence to offset the somewhat linear nature of our modern lives. The spine is designed to move, and one of the best things we can do for the long-term health of our spine is to move in all three planes of movement—sagittal (forward and back, or flexion and extension), coronal (lateral, or sideways, flexion) and transverse (rotation)—on a daily basis. As a Pilates Movement Educator, one of my roles is to concentrate on restrictions and the compensatory pat-



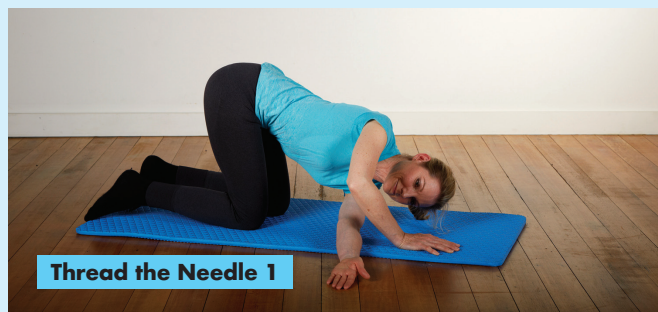




# THE EQUIPOISE SIX-MINUTE MULTI- PLANAR MOVEMENT DAILY SEQUENCE

As you move through the exercises, the importance of breath cannot be underestimated. It is one of the Pilates principals and is the foundation of the method. I encourage you to focus on it throughout the sequence, as breathing plays a vital role in dynamic stability, facilitates movement and relaxation and goes hand in hand with mindfulness. The more mindful we are when exercising, the greater the benefit of the exercises. Learning to breathe well is an important skill that can then be transferred to riding. Holding your breath creates rigidity and muscular tension, which has a detrimental effect on the suppleness of the entire body.

## The Sequence:



- Begin on all fours, also known as Quadruped position, making sure your wrists are under your shoulders, and your knees are underneath your hip joints. The alignment here is important: the better aligned we are, the more efficiently we bear weight through the joints and the healthier the joints will be.
- From here, lengthen from the top of your head to the tip of your tail. This axial elongation naturally engages the deep stabilizing muscles and places the spine in its optimal position to increase the available degrees of freedom of movement and increases its efficiency. Feel as though your abdominals are gently shrink-wrapping your spine as you spread the fingers and try to pull your mat apart slightly to stabilize your upper body. For the shoulder girdle to be well stabilized, the shoulder blades should be sitting flat against the back of the rib cage.
- Starting with **Thread the Needle**, exhale as you thread your left arm underneath your right arm. The right elbow bends out to the side as you reach the left arm through.
- Inhale, push yourself back to the start position, exhale as you reach the left arm forward, keep the right elbow tucked in as the right arm bends. Feel like you are stretching your breastbone without taking your head back.
- Inhale as you push through the right arm to the start position.
- Exhale as you sweep the left arm onto the back of the pelvis and rotate to the left.
- Inhale to the start position and repeat on the other side. Do three to six repetitions on each side then flow into the next exercise.
- From Quadruped, move into **Thigh Stretch** (p.51) by rounding your lower back into a cat stretch. Shift weight onto the thighs as you articulate the spine and roll up into a high kneeling position with the arms reaching forward at shoulder height.
- Exhale as you hinge back, tilting back from your knees. Be mindful of keeping your rib cage aligned over your hips and your head aligned over your rib cage.
- Inhale forward to perpendicular and hinge at the hips back



to the start position. Repeat six times.

- At the end of the sixth repetition, as you hinge back, split the arms, and rotate to the right, placing the right hand onto the right foot.

Inhale here, expanding the rib cage with the breath as you deepen the rotation. Exhale to return to the high-kneel start position. Repeat six times, alternating sides.

- Hinge back to the Quadruped start position.
- Flow from Quadruped into **Pointer** by lengthening and lifting the left arm as the right leg lengthens and lifts. Hold here for 3–5 seconds and return to the start position. Change sides and alternate for six to 10 repetitions.

- Finish in the Quadruped position then move into the next exercise—**Side Pointer**—by taking the right arm out to the side of the body as the left bent leg opens to the side. Keep the shoulders and hips very stable. This is a difficult exercise to do well. Reduce the movement if you are unstable and gradually expand it as you become more proficient. Repeat six to 10 times, alternating sides. You can add hand weights to this exercise if appropriate.

- From here hinge at the hips and roll back up to a high-kneeling position for the **Kneeling Lateral Stretch**.

- Take the right leg out to the side and make sure the hips, rib cage and head are all stacked in alignment. Axially elongate the spine and reach the left arm out to the side. Rotate the arm as it reaches overhead as you laterally flex to the right.
- Inhale here, directing the breath into the side of the rib cage to enhance the stretch, then exhale and restack to the start position. Repeat six times alternating sides.



Photos Courtesy, Helen Fletcher



terns that can accompany them and to therefore bring more efficient function and greater ease of movement to those riders I work with. It is not uncommon for riders to suffer from lower- back or hip pain. What starts as some tightness in certain muscles or muscle groups, or stiffness in joints or areas of the spine, left unaddressed soon moves from a restriction to a compensatory pattern, where movement and motor patterns begin to change to compensate for the restrictions of the stiffer area.

In the Pilates studio, the most common areas I address in relation to pain with riders and nonriders alike are the lower back, hip, neck and shoulder.

In order to affect the known healing power of movement, today we think beyond only muscles and joints and include the role of fascia. Fascia is connective tissue, a fibro-elastic net that comes in all forms from superficial to deep and envelops all muscles and organs throughout both our and our horse's bodies. It is a force transmitter and a whole-body tensional network.

It is now believed that we need to think of our bodies as a neuromyofascial web with the muscles embedded in the fascia in chains rather than think of individual muscles or muscle groups. This helps explain why a restriction in one part of the body can affect another part further along the chain. Myofascial restrictions can decrease joint mobility and the overall healthy performance of our bodies. Fascia is also our most important organ for proprioception and kinesthetic awareness—our knowledge of where our body is in space. Without this awareness, our position and our ability to feel can be compromised.

Movement hydrates fascia and, ac-

ording to current research in the field of fascia and fascial health, it is suggested that the more varied multiplanar movement we get into our fascial tissue, the healthier the entire body becomes. In contrast, if movement is not varied you are only hydrating the same areas. Multiplanar movements are also important for adaptability. As riders, we need to be dynamically stable in all planes of movement. This stability must be adaptable enough to respond to the constantly changing movement environment we experience on the horse.

What I love about Pilates for riders is that it is a whole-body movement system that enhances everything we do, and while there is a strong focus on the

designed to flow from one to the next. Mindful practice in a flowing sequence maximizes the benefits of each individual exercise. Following is a brief description of the exercises and their benefits to your riding and the long-term health of your spine. Please refer to the sidebar on p. 50 for detailed instructions on how to practice the sequence.

**Thread the Needle.** This multiplanar exercise rotates and extends the spine. Evenly balanced rotation is important for turns, corners and lateral work and for the distribution of load through the spine in movement. It also offsets the load on both the lumbar and cervical spinal areas. This exercise strengthens the deep and super-

ficial muscles of the shoulder as well as the stability of the shoulder blades, which is important for achieving both correct contact and upper-body pos-

tural strength.

**Thigh Stretch.** Another multiplanar exercise that flexes, extends and rotates the spine, the movements of this exercise are among the most important we can do on a daily basis for the long-term health of our spines and to significantly improve our ability to absorb the impact of the forces through our bodies produced by the movement of the horse. Spinal flexion mobilizes the pelvis and stretches and mobilizes the lumbar, thoracic and cervical areas of the spine. Plus, the synovial fluid that is produced during movement lubricates and provides nutrients to the joints and is increased after only five minutes. Joint mobility and suppleness go hand in hand. This exercise strengthens the front and the back of the body, challenges core stability and control and teaches the correct placement and

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deep-core-stabilizing muscles, there is so much more to the method than just core strength.

Pilates focuses on balancing the body from the inside out. It improves posture and postural imbalances and, along with the deep-core-stabilizing muscles of the spine, it stabilizes and strengthens both the shoulder complex and the hip complex with attention to both inner and outer stability. It is a fantastic cross-training method that utilizes exercises that enhance fascial health, increase suppleness, joint mobility, flexibility, dynamic stability and strength while correcting and rebalancing muscular asymmetries to support and facilitate both you and your horse's movement potential.

### **The Exercises and Their Purposes**

The multiplanar movement sequence (shown on p. 50) is a series of exercises





stacking of the rib cage and head over the pelvis, improving posture and alignment, and therefore movement efficiency. Efficient movement is economical movement, reducing wear and tear on the joints. Thigh Stretch also stretches the quadriceps and opens the front of the hips to encourage a longer leg in the saddle while strengthening the gluteal and hamstring muscles.

**Pointer.** This exercise strengthens the deep and superficial muscles of the shoulder as well as the stabilizing muscles around the upper back and shoulder blades. This is important for contact and upper-body postural strength. A well-stabilized shoulder

girdle allows following, sympathetic hands and plays an important role in the position of the head, neck and upper back. Pointer also stabilizes the pelvis and strengthens the gluteal muscles. It challenges core stability and control and teaches the correct

**Side Pointer.** This exercise, like Pointer, strengthens the deep and superficial muscles of the shoulder as well as the stabilizing muscles around the upper back and shoulder blades. The addition of small hand or leg weights will increase the strengthen-

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placement of the rib cage in relation to the shoulder girdle and pelvis. Cross-coordination exercises are good for the brain and improve a rider’s ability to disassociate the limbs from the torso and work them independently.

ing aspects of this exercise. It stabilizes the pelvis and strengthens the gluteal muscles. Both stability and mobility of the hips are important for the health of the lumbar spine and the position of the legs in the saddle. Again, like Pointer, it challenges core stability and control and teaches the correct placement of the rib cage in relation to the



shoulder girdle and pelvis, albeit not in a functional position. As I mentioned before, these cross-coordination exercises are good for the brain and improve a rider's ability to develop independent aids.

**Kneeling Lateral Stretch.** This exercise stretches the sides of the body and encourages lateral symmetry of the trunk. A symmetrical rider has an even length through both sides of the waist and an even distribution of weight through both seat bones. This is important for turns, circles and lateral movements.

This exercise stretches the adductors, the inside thigh muscles on the opposite side. Tight adductors can inhibit a deep seat and can also contribute to an anteriorly (forward) tilted pelvis in the

saddle, resulting in lower- back pain, tightness and movement restriction.

### **Improvement, Not Perfection**

This flowing movement sequence can be practiced every day and takes between six and 12 minutes, depending on whether you do six or 10 repetitions of each exercise.

This sequence can be used as a very effective pre-ride warm-up, as well as a daily suppling and strengthening routine. Perfection is an impossible goal, but if we are always moving in the direction of achieving equipoise—balance and symmetry—then we can improve our lives and our riding experiences exponentially. 📖

**Helen Fletcher** is a Level 4 Australian Pilates Method Association Pilates Practitioner and Movement Educator with more than 25 years of Pilates experience and is founder and owner of Equipoise Pilates for Equestrians. A dedicated rider and dressage enthusiast from a young age, Fletcher founded Equipoise Pilates for Equestrians to combine her passion for both riding and Pilates. She manages a Melbourne-based Pilates studio and, along with teaching individual riders in the studio, runs Equipoise Pilates Clinics and courses, teaching a variety of clients with needs that range from post-acute rehabilitation to conditioning for sport and everything in between.