

# Intro to Pilates

*Riders are discovering the benefits of this decades-old fitness regimen*

BY JENNIFER O. BRYANT

**E**VIDENTLY SOME RIDERS ARE born with an innate understanding of how to give a half-halt, apply a leg aid, and sit the trot. The rest of us have to learn it.

We lesser lights struggle to understand such unspecific directions as “use your seat.” Eventually I realized that the “seat” isn’t really the part you sit on; rather, it’s mostly the abdominal muscles and the muscles of the “trunk” and upper leg. This region constitutes what many athletic trainers refer to as the “core,” and the core is both your center of gravity and the part of your body that stabilizes all the others, the way that a trunk supports the branches of a tree.

As a dedicated but largely ungifted dressage rider, naturally I became intrigued when, in the course of interviewing FEI-level rider and trainer Betsy Steiner for a book about her unique training theories and methodology, she kept raving about a form of exercise that strengthens the core, builds lean long muscles without bulk, and enhances flexibility. Ever the dedicated journalist, I decided to familiarize myself with this method, called Pilates (Puh-LAH-teez) after its inventor, Joseph Pilates, who in the early 1900s developed a system of exercises he called “Contrology,” first for his own use and then as a rehab regimen for hospital patients.

Effectively forgotten for decades, the Pilates method was dusted off in the 1990s and soon became a hit with dancers, models, actresses, and others who were seeking a challenging alternative to conventional strength training. It’s not yet as popular as yoga, but its emphasis on building core strength (as

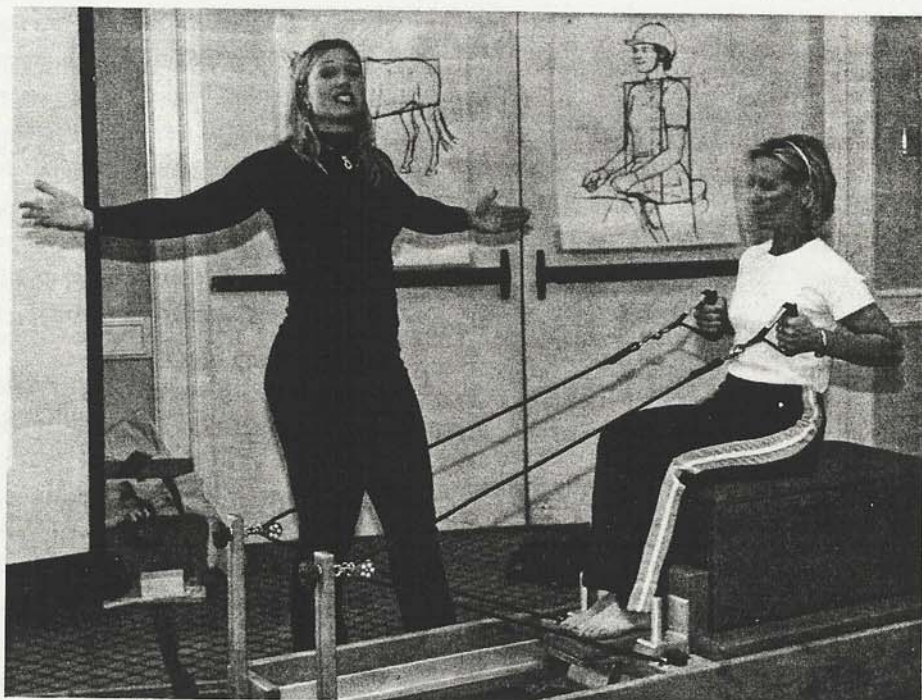
opposed to the often-cosmetic goals of weight training, like sculpted arms and abdominal “six-packs” that look impressive but don’t serve much purpose) has attracted athletes who understand that the core is the key to total-body strength, power, and stability.

Steiner has been hooked on Pilates for eight years, and during her winters in Florida she trains with Dr. Susan Habanova, a chiropractic physician who’s also a Pilates instructor. The two collaborated to choose the series of Pilates exercises described in Steiner’s forthcoming book, and they’ve also created their own Pilates-for-riders program, which they’ve dubbed Equilates. They presented an introduction to Pilates and to their system, sponsored by Suzanne Dansby-Phelps, at the 2002 USDF convention in Portland.

## Pilates Explained

As Habanova put it, the goal of Pilates is a balanced body. There should be balance in the strength and flexibility of the lower and upper body, and there should be balance in the muscles themselves. Most muscles are either tight and tense or weak and loose, she said; midway between those extremes is balance.

Joseph Pilates devised more than 500 exercises for his program. All focus on using the deep abdominals and other core muscles to stabilize the body and as the source of movement (which is why some Pilates instructors refer to the core as the “powerhouse”). Pilates students learn to breathe deeply and rhythmically through the movements (as in weight training, with the exhalation on the effort), and to engage their core muscles during both inhala-



Demonstrating a riding-related exercise on the Pilates “reformer” apparatus, Betsy Steiner uses her “core” to remain erect and aligned while Pilates instructor Dr. Susan Habanova looks on

SUSAN SEXTON/GALLOPING GRAPHICS



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Steiner and Habanova demonstrate a starting position for many Pilates mat exercises. Steiner's core is "engaged" so that her back is flat against the floor.



SUSAN SEXTON/GALLOPING GRAPHICS

"Axial elongation": Steiner shows the core strength and head-to-toe stretch needed to achieve this "plank" position on the reformer

tion and exhalation. Muscles work in opposition during many Pilates exercises, meaning that one set of muscles may be stretching while its counterpart is being strengthened.

The basic Pilates program is mat-based, but the exercises and additional variations and challenges can be performed with the help of special apparatus (see the photos for a look at the "reformer"). Most beginners start with mat classes, which translate well to at-home and on-the-road workouts. Certified Pilates instructors teach at studios around the country; for more information or to locate an instructor, visit [www.pilates-studio.com](http://www.pilates-studio.com).

Pilates will feel somewhat familiar to anyone who's done ballet or yoga. The emphasis is on form, and there are relatively few repetitions as compared to the reps and sets used in weight training. Although every exercise utilizes

the core, a complete mat-program run-through stretches and strengthens nearly every muscle in the body. There are nearly always variations to decrease or increase the difficulty of an exercise, and a good instructor adjusts the program to suit the participants' fitness levels and to allow for any relevant health issues, such as a bad back.

### Pilates and Riding

Although Steiner is a petite 5'4" with a tiny frame, she rides scores of big warmbloods with apparent ease. She's gifted and skilled, to be sure; but part of her secret is the fitness regimen that helps her to "use her seat" (there's that nebulous phrase again) to influence the horse so that her arms, legs, and upper body aren't trying to do all the work. Pilates also helps her to stay strong in her core and flexible in her hips and back so that she can absorb the horse's movement without her lower-back muscles' taking a beating, which can lead to the chronic back pain that's all too common in dressage riders.

Alignment and positioning also are important aspects of riding. "If you are crooked in your body, your horse cannot be straight," Steiner said. What's more, "You want to be able to use your body to influence your horse. If he wants to spook or get crooked, you want to be able to say, 'No, stay here under me.'" Her Pilates work, she said, has helped her to become a more effective rider.

During their session at the USDF convention, Steiner and Habanova led the audience through a series of simple exercises. The first step, Habanova said, is to learn to feel when your abdominal muscles are "on" and "off" and to begin to incorporate the principles of "core engagement" and "axial elongation" (basically, an elegant and erect posture that's achieved through core engagement and proper

### MEET THE PRESENTERS

FEI-level rider, trainer, and clinician **Betsy Steiner** represented the U.S. at the dressage World Championships in 1990, aboard Unanimous. She has had numerous Grand Prix-level wins at prestigious shows across the U.S. and is a USDF bronze, silver, and gold medalist. She divides her time between New Jersey and Florida, where she operates a training facility with her daughter, Jessie Steiner.



SUSAN SEXTON/GALLOPING GRAPHICS

Dr. Susan Habanova and Betsy Steiner

**Dr. Susan Tatiana Habanova** is a chiropractic physician and a Pilates practitioner at Village Chiropractic and Healing Arts Center, West Palm Beach, FL. She has a background in sports medicine and has worked with athletes in a variety of sports. Through her work with Betsy Steiner and other riders, she has developed an understanding of the unique physical demands of riding and programs designed to enhance riders' effectiveness in the saddle.

alignment and not through "sucking in the gut" or sticking out the chest). She had the audience members sit erect on the edges of their chairs, abs engaged. That effort alone showed many people that the ease and correctness with which Steiner demonstrated a selection of exercises is in fact the result of many hours of disciplined work.

Sounds a bit like dressage, doesn't it? ▲