

Balance yourself to balance your horse

How Pilates can help you become a better Clicker trainer and more connected to your horse

One of the goals of Clicker training is to achieve physical and mental balance for our horses.

Goals of Pilates include gaining best possible alignment in the human body and balancing the mind to maintain health.

When I started Clicker training, I decided to take part in the online course, created by Alexandra Kurland. During that course, a fair amount of time is spent teaching our own body mechanics. Those exercises are done without the horses and help the human to “organize” their bodies. Body organization is very important so as not to confuse the horse with uncoordinated movements. Instead we can deliver clear information to the horse. As a Physical Therapist and Classical Pilates Instructor, I couldn’t help but noticing how much the Pilates workout is related to the exercises that are described in the online course. It was very easy for me to understand the concept of those movements, and I am sure my knowledge about Pilates is helping me a lot on my way of becoming a Clicker trainer. But surely if Pilates is helping me in this process, it would help others, too! That’s what inspired me to write this article:

Pilates is a very unique method of body conditioning. Its inventor, Joseph Pilates, dedicated a lifetime to perfect his method of corrective exercise, which he had named “Contrology”. Here’s one of my favorite quotes by Joseph Pilates: **”Contrology develops the body uniformly, corrects wrong postures, restores physical vitality, invigorates the mind and elevates the spirit.”** This pretty much highlights the goals and benefits of this wonderful method.

When Joe died in 1967 he left us with different apparatuses and more than 800 exercises, all designed to complement every individual’s unique body challenges. All of us come with a history. And every back pain, shoulder ache and misalignment is unique in itself. Joseph Pilates understood that and developed an exercise regime where every student learns to do their own workout – a specific training that’s right for them. Not only can a good Pilates instructor pick those exercises that an individual needs due to certain body challenges, but they can also be instrumental to help athletes reach specific goals. Really everybody benefits from the Pilates workout – each skill for a specific sport or hobby can be schooled and advanced with this unique method.

Of course, Pilates isn't a quick fix. Just like in horse training – patience and persistence are important tools in order to reach our goals. Long term changes can only be achieved little by little. Small steps will lead to results that last. Joseph Pilates invented his method about 100 years ago and it has outlived many other fitness trends – in my opinion because the Pilates approach is honest and the results are truly life changing and long lasting.

In Clicker training, we are using different cues to let the horses know what we want from them. One important type of cue is body language. But to make sure the horses understand our body language correctly, we have to be specific and consistent in how and when we use it.

What's helping us do this is body awareness. Body awareness means the ability to feel where our body parts are located, where they are in relationship to each other and where they are in space. Mostly, we are not consciously thinking about how high we need to lift our feet to go upstairs, our bodies deal with uneven ground by itself and we are able to find our keys in our purse without needing to look inside. This process is also called proprioception and is a skill that will improve with training.

Besides being able to be more specific in our cueing, a better body awareness will make the rope handling skills more efficient, the riding posture smoother and the overall connection to the horse more harmonious. Good proprioception will also lead to better safety. As we all know, when working with horses really anything can happen. Environmental factors of any kind can distract a horse enough to bring both horse and rider out of balance. The better our body awareness, the more grounded we are. The more grounded we are, the higher our confidence level is, which leads to horses that feel secure around us.

But how does one increase their proprioception? With Pilates! The receptors responsible for body awareness are “living” in our joints, muscles and soft tissue. The better balanced and aligned our bodies are the easier it is for these receptors to do their job. As mentioned before, reaching best possible alignment is one of the many benefits achieved by the Pilates training. A balanced body is accomplished by working on various things, that are all part of a regular Pilates workout:

Flexibility of joints, nerves, muscles, tendons, ligaments and fascia.

Strength – and by that I don't mean bulging up of those big surface muscles, I am talking about the small muscles – deep inside our bodies that are responsible for stabilizing our joints. These are smaller muscles, mostly overlooked in common training methods and often underdeveloped due to our modern lifestyle.

Coordination is another important skill that's deteriorated and neglected but yet so helpful especially when working with our horses.

Balance in regards to equilibrium sense, balancing of right and left as well as front and back – this will make your handling around the horses so much easier.

Mind – Body Integration – if we are mindful about our movements, we can be mindful about our horses movements, too.

Breathing – an increased lung capacity leads to endurance in everything we do.

Now – let's get to work:

I am going to use one of the Clicker games as an example to demonstrate which skills we need and how to train those skills with some of the exercises from the Pilates system. I am purposely showing you exercises that do involve the Pilates apparatus. I do want people to understand that Pilates is a system and it works best if you have the ability to use all the equipment that Joseph Pilates invented. I started on the mat (like most people do), but was amazed when I saw the Pilates equipment for the first time. It looked so different than any other fitness machine I had seen before – well and it is. I think including pictures of exercises with the Pilates apparatus might interest people and maybe they would be tempted to explore “true” Pilates. I am aware that most people don't have these at home – and I also don't think you should just try these if you have never done Pilates before. Safety always comes first and the safest way to do the exercises is together with a knowledgeable trainer. However, it will give you an idea about what Pilates can do for you and that it is more than just “some exercise on the mat”.

The game I am picking is: “Grown Ups are talking, please don't interrupt”. It is one of my favorite Clicker exercises because it grounds my horse, it teaches him self-control (yes, he can stand in front of a hay bale and NOT eat from it). It is one of these basic skills for the horse to achieve physical and mental balance. Every time I work with him and feel the need to go back to “neutral”, I do Grown ups. It settles us for the next task or just gives me some time to “think” when I have to.

But here's the challenge. Horses are masters at reading body language. They thrive clear body language. The smallest shift in my body can become a different cue for my horse. With any horse uncoordinated moments from the handler may confuse the horse and lead to frustration.

Example for balanced posture of the handler and it's effect on the horse:



Good, balanced posture in Grown ups - clear body language for the horse.



The horse gets clear information and therefore balances himself.

Example for unbalanced posture of the handler and it's effect on the horse:



Unbalanced standing position doesn't give clear info for the horse, also it will be difficult to move out of this position for good food delivery.



The horse is unfocused and unbalanced. The lack of balance in the handler leads to miscommunication.

Food delivery out of Grown ups



In this example I am practicing feeding to a straight head and neck position - you can see the dynamic movement in my body. I am moving my arm out of my back - my whole body is connected to my center. And that's why I do have good balance, even though I have to stretch pretty far to feed.

Good balance in food delivery and it's effect on the horse:



Good standing position, feet connected to the ground so that the upper body can easily move into position to feed the horse. The spine is still elongated, no pressure on the spinal structures and the arm can easily feed in the right place.



Due to good feeding, the horse is in a square stand, his body weight shifted towards his hind, nice top line with a straight head.

Unbalanced handler during food delivery and it's effect on the horse:



Feet and legs are not evenly engaged into the ground. One foot is pointing outwards the other is straight. That puts the upper body in a bad position to rotate. The arm comes too low.



As a result of the unbalanced handler position, the horse has to twist it's head to get the cookie, also the head is too low, therefore the hind isn't engaged - see the right hind which is stretched out and how his left hind is resting instead of weight bearing.

Based on the pictures, which skills does the handler need while in "Grown ups"?

- A balanced standing position
- A grounded low body
- Coordinated arm/hand movements
- Ability to walk straight out of the standing position
- Ability to get out of walking back into balanced standing
- Ability to reposition - if needed - for food delivery
- Ability to work on both sides of the horse evenly
- Controlled movements
- Balanced, strong feet that are capable of working on any kind of surface
- A flexible spine to be able to rotate for food delivery

Here are some of the Pilates exercises that help to develop and strengthen these skills:

The Hundred

Note: Even the mat is a piece of equipment! It has two boxes, a strap on one end and a pole on the other end (not visible in this picture).



The Hundred - here shown on the mat. This is one of the most basic and important exercises in the Pilates system. No lesson will be done without "The Hundred". It's a breathing exercise, which focuses on increasing lung capacity and the whole body is working, too.

The Roll Back



This exercise is done on the Cadillac, using the Roll Down bar. The starting position teaches the low body connection into the ground and a tall back position. The spine is elongated, with all the stress taken off it - the shoulders connected into the back.

The action of the Roll Back mobilizes the spine, each single vertebra is lowered down into the mat and back up from there while the lower body remains stable and still.

The Saw



The Saw is done on the mat. It mobilizes the spine into a combined movement of rotation and flexion - again, the start position would be an elongated, stress-free spine. The low body is stable, in order to allow the upper body to move easily.

Front Splits



The Front Splits are done on the Reformer. This version stretches the hip flexors (so yummy), the achilles tendon and also triggers proprioception.

Foot Corrector



The work on the foot corrector corrects the alignment of our feet and helps developing the best possible arches for our feet. It also strengthens the foot muscles, works on a solid standing position and challenges the balance.



Press Down



The Press Down, shown here on the Highchair, targets our seat connection into the low body. In addition, this exercise strengthens the low back muscles and helps with walking strongly and balanced.

The Swan



The Swan - here on the Ladder Barrel - mobilizes the spine into Extension. It also works on the connection of the shoulders into the back and a stable low body.

I understand that some of these exercises might look daunting to you. But be assured that these are all exercises that everybody will be able to do with some training. Also, the exercises are shown here in its finished version. There are several in-between steps to reach this level. Just like Clicker training, in Pilates we are also breaking down the exercises into smaller, easier to digest pieces. And once you mastered one step, you'll move on to the next. Some of the shown exercises target the mobilization of the spine. Spinal flexibility is one of the key skills to have in life – here's what Joseph Pilates said: **"If your spine is stiff at 30, you are old. If it's flexible at 60, you are young."**

However, every Pilates exercise is a full body exercise. So even if the focus of a certain exercise is on spinal mobilization you are still working the entire body. And if you do it right, you will sweat from the inside out. It's a different feeling of sweating – Joseph Pilates called it “the internal shower”. And that's how it feels like – a true cleansing of your body. Once you have experienced it for the first time, you know what I mean.

Another similarity to Clicker training: Once you start with Pilates, you won't be able to go back to your usual workout routine. It's way too good and too addictive. Pilates is so much fun! It's more than just a boring workout in a smelly gym. Everybody I know looks forward to their Pilates lessons because it is rewarding. These exercises really make you feel so much better. And the results carry on to your daily life – and that's what Joe Pilates wanted. He gave us his method in order to live the life we want without restrictions, but with best possible health.

This brings us back to the topic of this article: Balance is an important skill to have and Pilates helps with it. And if you do Pilates, balance and body awareness will improve – so will your Clicker skills. Doing Pilates will bring the connection to your horse to a different level!

I hope you enjoyed reading about Pilates and how it connects to Clicker training. If you liked it – just wait, more is about to come.

Life loves balance!

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