

Organize Your Upper Body

Two super-effective (and easy!) Pilates-based exercises for better riding

BY JANICE DULAK AND SARAH MARTIN



CLASSICALLY ELEGANT: *Correct upper-body position is effective as well as aesthetically pleasing. Olympian Guenter Seidel (riding Fandango at the 2012 USEF Dressage Festival of Champions) is known for his near-perfect equitation.*

Every dressage rider wants to achieve good posture for maximum effectiveness as well as an elegant appearance in the saddle. But in the Pilates clinics for equestrians that USDF-certified instructor Sarah Martin and I conduct, we often encounter riders whose efforts to achieve “good posture” are actually hindering their ability to maintain a correct, elastic rein contact.

Many people are prone to a slumped, round-shouldered posture—often the result of many hours spent at desks, peering at computer screens, and driving. When dressage instructors tell their students to “sit up straight” and “put your shoulders back,” most riders make the mistake of pinching their shoulder blades together. This pinching action frequently results in a stiff, military-type pose, with the rider “cracking a walnut” between the shoulder blades in an attempt to “open” the chest.

Although this action might appear to solve the problem of rounded shoulders, it can cause the forearms and biceps to tense—which then cannot maintain a soft, supple connection with the horse’s mouth. Pinching the shoulder blades also causes an unintentional lifting of the chest and a tightening of the mid-back (the thoracic region). Mirroring the rider’s arched upper back, the horse’s topline actually hollows as well, especially in the withers area.

Effective and harmonious riding requires learning how to organize the upper body correctly. In this article, we’ll introduce you to two simple concepts that may revolutionize the way you “sit up straight.”

First, a Word About the Seat

Your upper body cannot function properly if your seat is incorrect. Effective riders follow and influence their horses’ movement by engaging their “core” (deep) abdominal muscles, which work in concert with the gluteal (buttock) muscles and the upper hamstrings. Together, these muscles stabilize the spine and pelvis, keeping the rider balanced and allowing the hip angle to open. (Pilates is one form of exercise that emphasizes core strength and stability, which allows the hips to open and close along with the horse’s movement.)

Your scapulae (shoulder blades), shoulders, and arms ride on top of your stable seat. Correct carriage of the upper ribs “ties” these parts into the seat, and then you can stabilize your scapulae down onto your rib cage. The triceps, which are the muscles at the backs of your upper arms, can then engage, allowing your elbows to open and close to softly follow the movements of your horse’s head and neck.

Exercise 1: Stabilize Your Rib Cage by “Knitting Your Ribs”

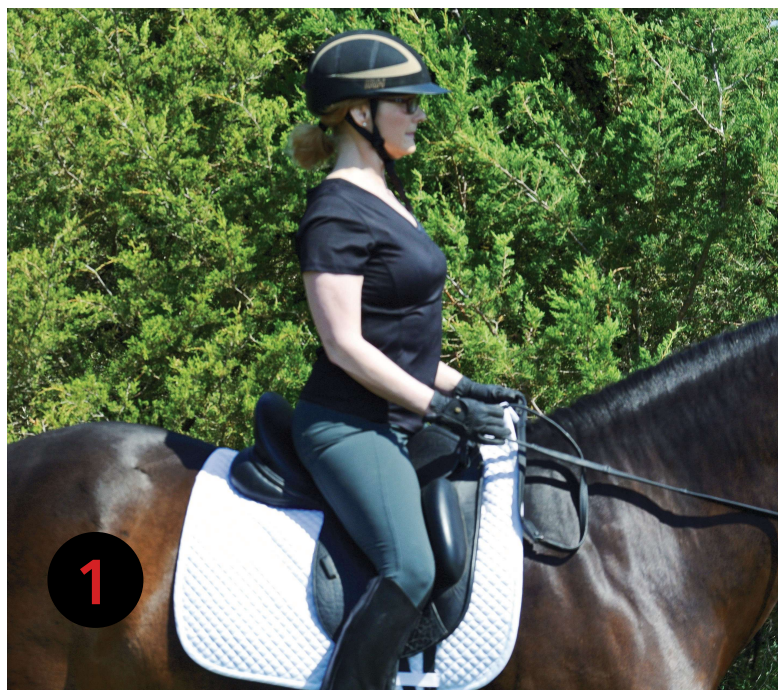
The concept of “knitting your ribs together” is the first step in organizing your upper body for proper posture and correct use of the arms for riding dressage. Although “knitted ribs” may not sound like the cure for rounded shoulders or unsteady rein contact, it’s an essential concept to master. Here’s why:

Look at the side view of a rider who’s pinching her shoulder blades together in an attempt not to slouch (photo 1, below). Without also engaging the muscles of the torso to stabilize the ribs, pinching the shoulder blades expands and lifts the front of the rib cage, thereby creating tension in the middle back as well as in the shoulders and neck.

You may know how to engage your lower abdominal muscles to stabilize your lower back. Knitting the ribs accomplishes the same thing for the upper back. Abdominal-muscle fibers run from the pubic bone all the way up to where your rib cage meets your sternum. The upper-abdominal fibers—often underdeveloped—help to stabilize the rib cage and create a strong but supple back. When these muscles are engaged, the scapulae cannot “pinch” back, and therefore the upper back cannot hollow.

Here’s how to knit your ribs:

Start by standing in front of a mirror and placing your hands on either side of your rib cage, beneath your sternum, fingers facing inward, as shown in photo 2. Inhale through



PINCHED SHOULDER BLADES: *While erect, this position creates tension in the arms and upper back*



2



3

KNITTING THE RIBS: Starting position (left) and ribs knitted (right)

your nose and you'll see the space between your fingers increase as your ribs expand. Now give a long, steady exhale through your mouth. Your fingers will move close together as your rib cage contracts.

Imagine that you're wearing a corset that someone is tightening each time you exhale. You'll begin to feel the action of your core muscles as they pull your ribs in (photo 3).

This "knitting" is a lateral muscular action. Don't pull your ribs down toward your pelvis, which will collapse your torso and round your back.

Knitting your ribs is the first step in learning how to connect your upper body to your core. When you ride, practice knitting your ribs. Experiment to find out how strongly you need to "knot" to fully engage and stabilize your core.

WHERE DO YOU AND YOUR HORSE RANK? YOU COULD BE GETTING AN AWARD!!



Check out the Adequan®/USDF Year-End Award standings at www.usdf.org under Awards/Standings to find out where you and your horse are ranked.

Learn more about the year-end award requirements in the *USDF Member Guide*.

Don't Miss These Important Year-end Award Deadlines!

- September 30, 2012 is the deadline for:
 - Submitting birthdates for vintage cup, adult amateur and junior/young rider awards
 - Declaring for vintage cup and verifying adult amateur status
 - Joining USDF for USDF Breeder of the Year eligibility
- All corrections must be reported to USDF by October 15, 2012 at 5:00 p.m. ET
- Photos (first place recipients only) for the yearbook issue of *USDF Connection* must be submitted digitally to USDF by October 26, 2012
- To receive an award at the Salute Gala & Annual Awards Banquet, you must submit the USDF Banquet Reply Form to USDF by November 2, 2012

COURTESY OF JANICE DULAK



DRAMATIC DIFFERENCE: When the shoulder blades are not properly stabilized, the result is the classic round-shouldered posture (left). Stabilizing the shoulder blades transforms the rider's posture (right).

Exercise 2: Stabilize Your Scapulae by "Riding off Your Underarms"

This is the second step in organizing your upper body and is key to correcting rounded shoulders. It will also help you understand how to use your arms in a more balanced way for better rein contact.

The scapulae (shoulder blades) are triangle-shaped bones on your upper back that glide along the back of your rib cage. If they are not stabilized, they will slide forward and contribute to rounded shoulders (photo 4).

As we've mentioned, many round-shouldered riders try to correct their posture by pinching the shoulder blades together. But as you saw in photo 1, doing so tightens the shoul-

INSTRUCTORS

do you
 have clients...

- ★ Learning "on the bit"?
- ★ Who are nervous?
- ★ That ride sensitive horses?
- ★ Who sometimes get left behind?
- ★ Have trouble riding "softly"?

If you answered "yes" to any of these questions, call now for a **FREE VIDEO** and learn how Rein-Aid can help you to help your clients.



Rein-Aid Inserts \$36.00 -- Elasto-Rein \$99.95
www.rein-aid.com or (800)773-4885

COURTESY OF JANICE DULAK

Can she hear you?

If she's using the right communication system, she won't miss a word.

We understand how important your lessons are. Our selection of one-way, duplex, and PA compatible coaching systems provide easy, clear, discreet communication to help you train at your very best.

Contact our experts for help in selecting the perfect communication system for you!



Shop online anytime at
www.eponaire.com
 or call us at:

EPONAIRE



POSTURE TRANSFORMATION: *Underarm muscles relaxed (left) and engaged (right)*

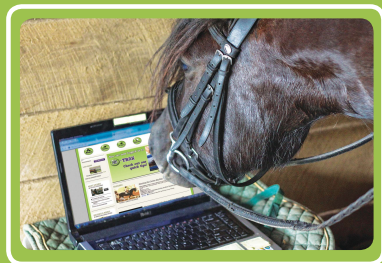
ders and neck and misaligns the upper body for riding. To correctly stabilize the scapulae, the shoulder blades must be “pulled down” rather than “pinched back.” Pulling the shoulder blades down allows the fronts of the shoulders to open and gives the upper arms a stable point from which to move.

To get the correct feeling of pulling the scapulae down, “ride off your underarms”:

Pull the backs of your underarms (the muscles in your armpits) down toward your waistline. The muscles you’ll feel engaging are the scapulae-stabilization muscles (photos 6 and 7). When you engage these muscles correctly, you will feel your shoulders opening (you’ll feel a gentle stretch across your pectoral [chest] muscles) without having to pinch your shoulders back.



USDF’s online learning center for dressage and equine education



Through one convenient location

- *access hundreds of educational resources,*
- *engage in structured learning activities,*
- *and earn USDF University Program credit.*

Check e-TRAK’s Quick Tips each week and “Like” e-TRAK on Facebook!

COURTESY OF JANICE DULAK

As you ride, experiment with the feeling of riding off your underarms. See how much (or how little) you need to engage your armpit muscles to stabilize your scapulae.

Once you feel you can ride off your underarms by pulling the scapulae down toward your waistline, swing your bent elbow forward and back. The movement may feel foreign at first. When you learn to move your elbow while keeping your scapulae in place, you will find that the use of the biceps (the muscle at the front of the upper arm) can be regulated with the triceps, thereby creating a balanced upper-arm musculature. Over time, you will improve your ability to maintain an independent, elastic rein contact.

Better Engagement, Better Equitation

Applying the concepts of knitting your ribs and riding off your underarms will help you to use your upper body correctly and will eliminate the need to pinch the shoulder blades together. With practice, you will be able to use your arms in a more balanced way as you ride.

When your arms are stabilized and “connected” to your core, you will be better able to establish a consistent, elastic contact. It will be easier to sit the trot while maintaining

an independent contact with the reins, rather than inadvertently hanging on your horse’s mouth for balance or unintentionally hitting him in the mouth with the reins.

Good luck and happy riding! ▲

Thanks to our photo models, Gina Walls and her six-year-old Andalusian, Diego.

Janice Dulak is the author of the book and DVD Pilates for the Dressage Rider. Her new DVD, Nine Pilates Essentials for the Balanced Rider: A Magic Circle Workout, was released last month by Trafalgar Square Books. She lives with her husband and horses in Illinois. Visit her website at DulakPilates.com.

Sarah Martin is a USDF bronze, silver, and gold medalist and a USDF-certified instructor/trainer through Fourth Level. She is collaborating with Janice Dulak on the DVD series Be the Rider You Want to Be. Sarah and her husband, Clayton Martin, teach and train at their Taka Chi Dressage Stables in Blanca, CO. Visit them online at SarahMartin-Dressage.com.

LIPIZZAN IDENTIFICATION PROGRAM (LIP)



A JOINT ENDEAVOR FOR RECOGNIZING UNREGISTERED LIPIZZANS IN THE UNITED STATES

Do you think you might be the owner of a Lipizzan or Part-Lipizzan?

Contact us & we will help you explore that possibility

The Lipizzan Rescue Foundation and the United States Lipizzan Federation share the fundamental belief that Lipizzans are historically important and believe that their owners should be aware of the breed's importance in preserving the role of a rare breed with a noble history. We believe that identifying Lipizzans wherever they are, and maintaining contact with Lipizzan owners, is crucial to preserving, protecting, and promoting these special horses.

Get started by emailing USLFOffice@gmail.com or calling 503/589-3172

Set Your DVR to Watch US Dressage on



Rural America's Most Important Network

September Schedule

9/5	3:30 am & 5:30 pm ET	9/19	5:30 pm ET
9/12	5:30 pm ET	9/26	5:30 pm ET
9/13	3:30 am ET	9/26	5:30 pm ET

Check your local listings or go to rfdtv.com for all USDF show scheduling.