

Improved Riding Through *Pilates*

BY LESLIE THRELKELD · PHOTOS BY JOSH WALKER



ABOVE: Brandy Greenwell has found physical and mental strength through Pilates that benefits her in life and in the saddle. She now shares those benefits as a professional instructor. *From left:* Karen Buckley, Charlotte Taylor, and Katy Carter. **FOLLOWING PAGE FROM LEFT:** Brandy instructs students through an ab-burning, core-building exercise; Pilates utilizes numerous tools to strengthen the body and mind.

As eventers we require our horses to be fit, but it can sometimes be hard to hold ourselves to the same standard. Riding once or twice a day is not enough, but who really likes going to the gym after a long day at work? Do not fret or beat yourself up about it, we understand. Leave the clothes hung on the treadmill and let the dumbbells collect more dust – Eventing USA has explored a way to help you get fit, ride better, and have fun, too.

TUCKED IN THE HEART OF VIRGINIA HORSE COUNTRY, DOWN THE ROAD FROM THE EQUINE-RICH TOWN OF MIDDLEBURG, A ROWDY BUT DEDICATED GROUP OF EQUESTRIANS GATHER IN A BASEMENT STUDIO SEVERAL TIMES A WEEK TO ROLL AND STRETCH ON A MAT ON THE FLOOR. They are doing Pilates, and their instructor Brandy Greenwell is an equestrian herself.

Brandy has always been involved with horses. She was foxhunting before she was born, and as an adult she started an Irish Draught breeding business with her mother. Despite all the time she spends tossing hay bales and lifting feed bags, Brandy regularly engages in additional fitness activities. It was a lingering back injury that eventually led her to Pilates. She was hooked after the first class, and four years later she decided to become an instructor.

Not surprisingly, the majority of Brandy's students are also equestrians. Her clientele base was initially due to her location and connections, but soon her students were spreading the word: Pilates benefits you in the tack!

One enthusiastic Pilates participant was already friends with Brandy when she started taking classes. "I thought it would be fun!" Katy Carter said. "I started in the fall of 2011 and have been participating regularly since then. I have tried yoga in the past and did not really love it, so I figured why not try Pilates?"

There is much fun to be had during a Pilates class in Brandy's basement studio, and Katy is the source for considerable giggling (which is also a great calorie burner) and jokes. All kidding aside, Katy's full-time job requires long hours riding, teach-

ing, and foxhunting. Over time, multiple injuries were complicating her lifestyle. "I had a couple of years where I kept getting hurt badly; broken back, broken leg, concussions, etc. So I was experiencing a lot of physical challenges with regard to riding," she explained. "The Pilates practice has helped improve my overall strength and balance tremendously, plus I am using my body more efficiently and correctly."

Katy credits Pilates for her swift return to foxhunting after her injuries; it helped her to regain both strength and flexibility. Katy has also found length in her legs and space between her vertebrae, allowing her wrap her legs around a horse and follow its motion for a better sitting trot. "I also have a six-pack now instead of looking like I drank one!" Katy joked.

Charlotte Taylor, who has extensive experience retraining ex-racehorses, began taking Pilates classes to get in shape. Weight loss was not Charlotte's primary motivation as she is naturally lean. Still, within three sessions she could tell a difference in how her clothes were fitting.

On the mat, Charlotte has also found relief from multiple pains. Her neck, which was injured in a car accident when she was 18 years old, is much more flexible, and a recently torn hip flexor has recovered to be stronger than ever. "I have also aligned my hips more, which would help me to sit more squarely in the saddle," she said.

Several of Brandy's other students are also new to Pilates, and each is finding the experience beneficial. Karen Buckley has lost three inches off her waist and hips without dieting. Another is improving flexibility in her hips and building muscle in her legs after suffering an immobilizing injury.

Brandy and her students have found length and strength in and out of the tack through Pilates practice, and they are happy to share some stretches and exercises with you. *Eventing USA* extends a special thanks to Katy Carter and Charlotte Taylor for modeling the moves, and also to Brandy for allowing us to attend class to take photographs, learn, and have fun.



About Brandy...

Leslie Threlkeld: *Why Pilates? What is so great about it?*

Brandy Greenwell: The thing I love the most about Pilates is the very controlled, precise movement of each exercise. This allows me to focus so deeply on where I need to gain strength, yet equally allows me to protect my weaknesses from injury. Each session is designed to be done in a specific order for maximum benefit and an entire body workout. The benefits include improved coordination, flexibility, balance, strength, concentration, and layers of long, lean muscles. The involvement of breath allows oxygen to flow throughout your body promoting circulation and clarity. It is a complete mind-body experience.

LT: *How has Pilates benefited you personally?*

BG: On so many levels and so many ways it is overwhelming. I have made dear friends through Pilates. I have minimized years of excruciating back pain and corrected my bad conformation through Pilates. I left a comfortable career and took a chance on a passion allowing me to find my inner teacher. I feel better about myself from the inside out. I ask my horses to work better for me as well as working better for them. I ride better, I clean stalls better, sweep aisles, throw hay bales, and lift feed bags with ease.

LT: *What about Pilates is great for riding?*

BG: The big thing is core strength. Pilates is designed to build layers and layers of solid core strength. If you have a solid core, not just abs, then everything on top of a horse is easier—balance, coordination, control. The formation of long, lean muscles allows you to feel and guide your horse through your body, perfecting your aids and generating beautiful responses. The practice with breath helps you to maintain focus and precision with everything from making that turn after the oxer to not panicking when you forget your transition at C.

I really feel that exploring the physical layers of my own body through Pilates has made me a better horse owner as well as a more sensitive rider. We can all tell if a horse has an abscess, a bowed tendon, or is lame at the trot, but weaknesses of the spine, pelvis, shoulders, neck, and poll can very often go unnoticed and under schooled. Imagine your horse always leaving long and flinging itself over fences. Does he just have a good “wee-hee” mentality or perhaps he cannot find the space in his vertebrae to get into a deep spot and articulate his spine over a fence? The length you can find in your leg and spine through Pilates can really aid your training by helping your horse to lift, stretch, and use his body with control and precision. How cool would it be if you were both able to do that at the same time? Unstoppable.

About Bridon Irish Draughts:

Brandy, her husband Nick, and her mother, Brianne Sells, are the team behind Bridon Irish Draughts, a breeding business formed with the goal of creating the perfect amateur mounts with size, substance, and outstanding athletic ability. They stood the well-decorated Glenlara and his son Bridon Glenmore, and they have bred four, fully approved Irish Draught stallions. They take great pride in their mares, all of whom are Irish Draughts from Ireland or bred on the farm, and they are big believers in the strength of the dam side.

Bridon Irish Draughts has produced several successful event horses and at least one with ties to their mares or stallions has participated in the IDHSNA USEA Future Event Horse classes every year since its inception in 2007.

Bridon Beale Street (Mountain Pearl x Graceland Price) competes at the one-star level and has produced several FEH champions in California. Glenlord's Full Moon Fortune (Bridon Glenlord x Fuelonthefire) was the 2011 IDHSNA USEA FEH Central U.S. Overall Grand Champion.

Core Curriculum Pilates

WORD TO THE WISE: “It is best to take at least one session with a trained Pilates professional to learn how to do the movements correctly,” Brandy said. “I have no problem with people doing things at home, but even through descriptions and videos it can be easy to injure yourself. And we want everyone to love Pilates!”

1



2



1 and 2: To Start

Lie back with your legs straight and your arms extended above your head. Point and flex your toes, roll your wrists, and wiggle your fingers. Stretch as if you were trying to reach to the opposite sides of the room, finding the length in your legs by reaching out from your hips. Check in and up with your abdominal muscles, allowing your ribs to “kiss.” This should be a nice, relaxing stretch. After this, move both legs to one corner of the mat, allowing your hands to follow so that you make a banana shape, stretching out your side. Repeat on the other side. Do not rush either of these stretches; take your time, and enjoy it, and it is okay to yawn!

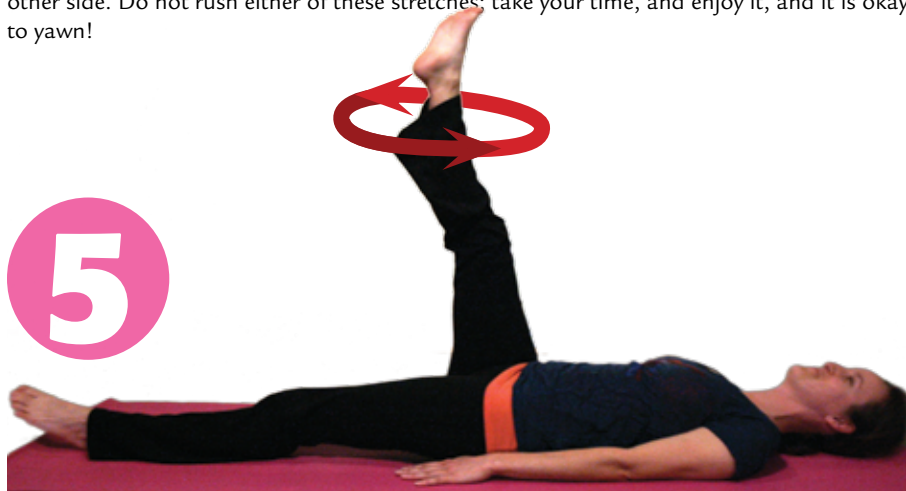
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3: Hip Flexor Stretch

Lie back with your knees bent. Lift your left leg and cross it over the right leg, with your left ankle resting on your thigh just above your right knee. Now, lift your right leg so your foot is off the ground, hold your right knee with your right hand, and push your left knee away from your body with your left hand. Allow your hip and hamstring to stretch. Now, cross your left leg all the way over the right, as you would sitting cross-legged in a chair, and pull both legs into your chest, really stretching the hip and hamstring. Repeat the process on the opposite side.

5



5: Single Leg Circles

Lie on your back with your knees bent and your hands firmly planted face down by your sides. Bring one leg up to 90 degrees and cross it over your body, down, around, and back up, creating small, controlled circles. Keep your hips very still and only make circles as large as you can keep the control. Remember to check in with your abs (kissing ribs), keep your shoulders down, and your back flat on the ground. Do not lift your lower back or bring your opposite leg off the mat to make the single leg circles easier. Focus on accurate, controlled movements. Do five to eight single leg circles in both directions. Scissor your legs to switch, and repeat the exercise with the other leg.

4: Half Roll Down

Start in a seated position with your knees bent and your hands just behind and below your knees. Scoop in and up with your abdominal muscles so your ribs are “kissing.” Create a C-shape with your spine and curl your head, keeping your eyes on an imaginary target on your bellybutton, but keep your shoulders down. Inhale and roll back just until your arms are straight. Then exhale and come back up. Remember to hug your midline to maintain upper body control, and squeeze your legs together to keep your feet down on the ground. Do five to ten repetitions. If you want to challenge yourself, inhale and roll back until your arms are straight, then pause, exhale all the air out, inhale completely, then exhale to come back up. You should feel the tension in your abdominals as you breathe. Who knew breathing could be so hard! Do no more than three repetitions.

4





6: Rolling Like A Ball

Start in a seated position with your knees bent. Position yourself so you are balancing slightly back on your seat bones, your feet are off the ground, and your legs are pressed together. Grab your ankles, tuck your head, and create a C-shape with your whole spine. Check in and up with your abs and allow your waist to come back so that when you roll, your lower back touches the mat first. Inhale and roll back just to the tips of your shoulder blades, and then exhale as you roll back up. Do not roll all the way back up to the seated position with your feet on the floor, but maintain the control in your abdominal muscles and hips to pause at the top, balanced slightly back on your seat bones with your feet up. The roll should be smooth and controlled. Do not “plunk” back onto your back when rolling down, and do not lift your hips or drop your head to help you roll back up. Keep your head tucked, your abs tight, your eyes on your bellybutton, and maintain the C-shape with your spine. Roll like a ball five to eight times.

7



7: Single Leg Kick

Lie on your stomach with your legs and the tops of your feet firmly planted on the mat. Lift yourself onto your elbows. Your shoulders should align just over your elbows, and your hands should be out in front of you in a fist so you almost look like a sphinx. Your eyes should be gazing at the mat between your wrists, making your neck long and stretching the spine. Most importantly, check in and up with your abs so that you would be able to slide a piece of paper underneath you. One at a time, lift each leg towards your buttocks and pump it three times. You may point or flex your toes, but you should keep the opposite leg and your hips still. This stretches your thighs and is a good strengthening exercise for your calves. Do not just flop your legs up and down; keep the control. Do five to eight single leg kicks with each leg, alternating legs between reps.

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