PILATES FOR HORSES
stretching exercises to improve core stability

Welcome to Part Six of our exciting new series, Pilates for Horses, in collaboration with Gillian Higgins.

“Pilates is a conditioning system that increases the core stability, strength and body awareness, re-dresses imbalances and re-aligns the body from the inside out,” Gillian says. “It can improve posture, achieve a balance between strength and flexibility, and relieve tension. Many principles of pilates can be applied to horses. Core stability and strength are as important to horses as they are to riders. Maintaining stability, posture and balance can contribute to more effective training, improved performance and reduce the risk of injury.”

There are two main types of stretching, Gillian explains. ‘Passive’ stretches are performed by the handler. Your horse needs to feel relaxed and confident to achieve these stretches properly. ‘Active’ stretches require active muscle contraction from the horse to move body parts and create the stretch himself. Active stretches can be performed during ridden or groundwork exercises and also with food rewards, such as carrots.

The most important thing to remember when stretching your horse or pony is that cold connective tissues which have low blood saturation can be more susceptible to injury. “Therefore, it is absolutely vital that your horse is warm before completing any of these exercises,” Gillian says. “Never attempt to stretch cold muscles.”

HOW TO STRETCH
1. Begin slowly. Unless otherwise stated, once the maximum stretch is reached hold it there for 5-15 seconds to allow the muscle fibres to relax before taking the stretch further.
2. Work a manageable programme into your daily routine.
3. Be patient. You will only see the benefits of stretching if you perform the stretches regularly and consistently.

STRETCHING CAN
- Increase stride length, range of movement, engagement, flexibility, athleticism and suppleness.
- Reduce muscular soreness, tension and stiffness.
- Reduce the risk of injury to joints, muscles and tendons.
- Improve coordination. Maintain the current level of flexibility.
- Increase mental and physical relaxation.
- Increase circulation.
- Enhance body awareness.

“Working on the principle that most people will forget or not be able to manage these exercises once or twice a week, I find the best way is to try and fit the exercises into your daily routine rather than trying to set aside a certain amount of time each day,” Gillian advises.

IMPORTANT CONSIDERATIONS
- Cold connective tissues which have low blood saturation can be more susceptible to injury. Therefore, it is absolutely vital that your horse is warm before completing any of these exercises,” Gillian says. “Never attempt to stretch cold muscles.”
- If your horse is unsound, for instance your horse has recently sustained an injury, stretching may be inappropriate. Seek professional advice before commencing a stretching program with your horse.
- If in doubt during any of these exercises, seek assurance from your veterinarian and take advice from a therapist. They will assess your horse’s musculature and plan a suitable program of stretches. They can also show you how to perform stretches safely without risk to either yourself or your horse.
- All horses may kick or bite if they don’t like the exercise. If in doubt, try using a towel around the back of the pastern to support the weight of the limb.
- This exercise is good for young horses to help them develop proprioception, stretching out the muscles to help alleviate stiffness and increasing stride length.

AIM
1. To stretch the triceps, latissimus dorsi and the muscles down the back of the forelimb involved in retraction
2. To improve proprioception (spatial awareness of body position), range of movement and stride length

HOW TO DO IT
1. Pick up your horse’s forelimb, as if picking out the hoof, and hold until his leg is relaxed.
2. Bring his leg forwards to encourage him to stretch.
3. Keep the limb low, so the hoof is pointing towards the ground.
4. With this exercise, it is a matter of giving your horse the opportunity to stretch, rather than forcing it.
5. Hold his leg securely so he feels confident to relax and allow his leg to be held in this unfamiliar position.
6. To encourage a greater stretch, hold the underside of his hoof and/or apply a little pressure on the point of elbow to encourage him to extend his joints.
7. Hold this position for as long as possible - up to 15 seconds if your horse will allow.

TIP
Aim for a small stretch to start with, gradually increasing over several days. It may take time for your horse to develop the skill and confidence to relax into this stretch.

Think about your own posture whilst performing this exercise to prevent straining your back. If needed, try using a towel around the back of the pastern to support the weight of the limb.

This exercise is good for young horses to help them develop proprioception, stretching out the muscles to help alleviate stiffness and increasing stride length.

With Gillian Higgins
PILATES FOR HORSES

LATERAL STRETCHES OF THE FORELIMB

AIM
1. To stretch the abductors and adductors - the muscles of the forelimb involved in lateral work
2. To stretch the triceps and other muscles down the back of the forelimb in retraction
3. To improve the proprioception (spatial awareness of body position), range of movement and stride length

HOW TO DO IT
1. Facing your horse’s hind quarters, pick up the forelimb.
2. Ensure that his leg is relaxed before commencing mobilisations.
3. Bring his leg forwards to encourage your horse to stretch.
4. Keep his foot low throughout all of these movements.
5. Hold the leg securely to enable your horse to feel secure and confident to relax into the stretch.
6. Keeping his leg forwards, gradually take the hoof away from his body at an angle of 40 degrees.
7. Take the hoof across his body at an angle of 40 degrees.
8. Maintain the position for up to 15 seconds, if your horse will allow.

TIP
Only ask for a small stretch to start with, gradually increasing the range over several days. Hold the leg above the fetlock joint to encourage your horse to relax and extend his leg backwards.

This exercise is good for stretching the muscles involved in lateral work, young horses to help them develop proprioception, stretching out the muscles to alleviate any stiffness behind and increasing stride length.

NEXT MONTH
Don’t miss next month’s issue of Horses and People Magazine where Gillian will continue this Pilates series with more stretching exercises to help strengthen the core muscles that assist in lateral work, and increase stride length and movement.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Gillian Higgins, a sports and remedial therapist and event rider based in the UK, works with horses and riders from all disciplines. After realising that many horse owners could benefit from a deeper understanding of how their horse works, Gillian developed Horses Inside Out, an organisation providing insight into equine locomotion, training and management from an anatomical perspective.

PILATES FOR HORSES

FORELIMB RETRACTION STRETCH

AIM
1. To stretch the muscles involved in protraction of the foreleg

HOW TO DO IT
1. Facing your horse’s head, pick up the foot supporting the leg above the fetlock and below the knee.
2. Hold the leg in a flexed position until you feel your horse relax.
3. Gently increase the pressure on the upper limb, so the knee is brought backwards.
4. Try to hold this position for 3-5 seconds and repeat 3 times on each side.

TIP
A good time to perform this stretch is immediately following work.

This exercise is good for young horses to help them develop proprioception, stretching out the muscles to alleviate any stiffness through the shoulder region, and increasing stride length and freedom of movement through the shoulder.

The muscles involved in protraction and around the front of the shoulder are stretched. These include the biceps brachii, pectorals and the brachiocephalic muscle.

To alter and increase the stretch, try using a carrot to encourage the head around to the opposite side. This will greatly increase the stretch, particularly in the muscles at the base of the neck as pictured.