

I have found that beginning shoulder-in exercises opens up a whole new proprioceptive maze of confusion for both horse and rider. Prior to this experience, both horses and riders have traveled along straight lines where their bodies have moved as a single unit, with everything facing forward in the direction they are moving. The horse's hind end follows the path of his head, neck and shoulders. Example, trotting down the long side of the track. Now we introduce the shoulder-in. The horse's hind end still tracks straight, but unlike before, now he has to move along a straight line with the front of his body and his head pointing inward. Essentially, here the horse has to learn not to follow his head, neck and shoulders. To add to this proprioceptive dilemma, the horse now has to adapt to the feeling that his front end is traveling sideways while his hind end is tracking straight.

But the horse is not alone in this confusing endeavor. Likewise for the rider, their shoulder position will be at the same inward angle as the horses shoulders. And just like the horse, the rider's pelvis will remain facing forward, tracking straight along the track.

The "3" Basic Pitfalls

With an inexperienced rider, or green horse, we can expect to see some (or all) of these basic pitfalls occur. With a more experienced horse and rider, these pitfalls should never occur.

- 1- Horse moves along the track with his body straight but his head and neck turned to the inside
- 2- Horse swings his haunches out to get into the "shoulder-in" position and ends up leg yielding along the track (on 4 tracks instead of 3) with a straight spine and no body bend
- 3- Horse will try to follow his head and neck and move away from the track toward the inside of the arena

Many shoulder-in performance issues occur as the result of the rider using too much inside rein, not enough lateral direction, and not sufficient support from the inside leg. Less experienced riders often use their inside leg too far behind the girth, or tense their body and forget to use weight aids to direct the horse along the track, or fail to keep their upper body turned and their pelvis straight.

So, now that you know what not to do, let's talk about what you should do to get a good, correctly trained shoulder-in.

Schooling a Correct Shoulder-in

A correctly ridden shoulder-in is a pleasure to watch. The horse will be moving with his shoulders to the inside, bent around the rider's inside leg, with his inside hind leg following in the track of his outside foreleg. The horse will travel on 3 tracks instead of 4. His weight will be shifted toward his hindquarters and he will move forward freely with a lightened forehand in an appropriately round frame.

Specifically, the horse's shoulders angle away from the track at about 30 degrees, and his bend will be similar to his body position on a 10 meter circle.

Proper schooling of the shoulder-in sets up a solid foundation for all training, since this skill gives the horse the foundation to develop greater suppleness, balance, strength, flexibility, and connection. Unfortunately, *improperly* schooling the shoulder-in can easily produce undesired effects such as resistances, crookedness, and unsoundness, to name a few. Therefore, the shoulder-in is not only an important skill to include in your training program, but it is essential that you school it correctly.

In order to do this, you need to understand the correct aids. So, here they are.

- 1)- **Seat and weight**: your shoulders should be turned slightly to the inside at the same angle as your horse's shoulders. Do not twist your pelvis- it should remain on the same angle as your horse's pelvis. Make sure your inside seat bone is weighted enough to bend the horse and your outside seat bone is not blocking his movement down the track. You should be looking in the direction you are going.
- 2)- **Bridle**: your reins will help assist the horse's position and direction. Your outside rein supports the horse's shoulder and your inside rein encourages your horse to stay softly flexed toward the inside. **Do not pull on the horse's head in using the inside rein.**
- 3)- **Legs**: use your inside leg at the girth to direct your horse's movement along the track. Your leg is slightly behind the girth passively keeping the haunches from swinging out.

As you come out of the corner, **allow your horse's forehand to leave the track as if you were beginning to ride a circle.** The moment you feel the forehand begin to leave the track, simultaneously 1) support the horse on the outside rein to keep your horse from leaving the track, and 2) use your inside leg to direct the horse along a path parallel to the track and step under his body with his inside leg. Feel as though you are pushing your horse from your inside seat and leg into the outside rein (but be very careful not to lean to

the inside). Begin asking for only a few steps at a time, and always straighten your horse before the next corner

Note- It is imperative that as you come out of the corner the haunches remain in exactly the same position as if the horse were to continue traveling straight along the track. ***The shoulder-in position is achieved by moving the horse's shoulders to the inside and NOT by moving the haunches to the outside!! It is this component which develops the correct suppleness and bend along the horse's spine, allows for movement on three tracks, and defines the shoulder-in.

Additional Helpful Hints

It is important to understand how the shoulder-in differs from leg yielding along the track. Leg yielding will have the horse on 4 tracks. Leg yielding has less spinal bend and vertebral rotation, and less engagement behind. As a result, leg yielding does not offer the same advanced schooling benefits as the shoulder-in. For this reason, rider's commonly train leg yielding as an introduction to lateral work before attempting shoulder-in.

Remember that the shoulder-in movement is on three tracks, which means the inside hind tracks up on the same line as the outside front leg.

Benefits of Schooling Shoulder-in

There are many, but here is the 'short list':

- develops increased engagement behind
- improves inside leg to outside rein connection
- teaches horse to carry more weight on the hind legs
- strengthens inside hind leg
- improves straightness
- increases suppleness
- balances the horse and refines self-carriage
- lightens horses outside shoulder
- great exercise to improve horse's understanding horse to bend around your inside leg
- great gymnastic exercise for longitudinal muscle flexibility and hock flexion
- presents basic preparation for advanced lateral work
- rider learns greater understanding of aids, weight shift and connection for lateral work
- helps the rider develop improved muscular independence and relaxation

Final thoughts (and some more important info)

The shoulder-in should be introduced at the walk, can be schooled at all gaits, but is commonly trained at the sitting trot. You can however, school it while posting. I find that both the horse and rider can benefit from schooling the shoulder-in while posting on the opposite diagonal.

Some trainers believe it is preferable to introduce the horse to shoulder-fore before beginning shoulder-in.

The horse should bring his forehand off the track as a result of you turning your upper body, and not as a result of pulling the head to the inside with the inside rein.

Horses and riders of all disciplines benefit from schooling shoulder-in.

.....and so will you!

Until next time,

Dr. Bev Gordon

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