

Shoulder-in: A Preliminary Training Tool for All Horses.

“Shoulder-in” (**shoulder-in**) is a 3-track movement of the horse where the shoulders take one track, and the hind quarters take another. It can be ridden on a circle and on a straight line. The 3 tracks are made as inside hind takes the same line as the outside foreleg and the horse is bent away from the direction of movement. Shoulder-in is a basic tool which can be used to help a horse rebalance under the weight of a rider and, as such, is relevant to every ridden discipline. Shoulder-in is much more than just a “dressage movement” in a dressage test. Shoulder-in is an essential gymnastic exercise for every horse.



A correctly ridden shoulder-in has the following effects:

1. Mobilisation of the hind quarters when practised on a circle;
2. Mobilisation of the forehand particularly in counter shoulder-in on a circle;
3. Strengthening and engaging the hind quarters;
4. Correcting asymmetry;
5. Developing core stability and gymnastic ability; and
6. Remediating horses.

References to shoulder-in are first found in the 17th Century works of William Cavendish the Duke of Newcastle (1593–1676)¹ (**Newcastle**) who practised shoulder-in on a circle. In the 17th Century work of Francois Robichon de la Guérinière (**Guérinière**)² Guérinière recommended on the straight line so that the horse could...

“...develop complete suppleness and perfect freedom in all parts of his body.....it both supple the shoulders but also prepares the horse for placing weight on his haunches because with each step that he takes in this posture, he brings the inside hind leg forward under the belly and places it over the outside hind leg, which he cannot do without lowering the haunch³”

How do we do Shoulder-in?

As Guérinière and Cavendish (the latter being influenced by the French écuyer, Antoine de Pluvinel) are from the French classical school of training horses, we go to the French classical technique to work out how to ride shoulder-in. The best French methodology can be found in at Ecole de Légèreté taught

¹ *A General System of Horsemanship* by William Cavendish Duke of Newcastle facsimile reproduction of the edition of 1743 Trafalgar Square Books Vermont 2012. The book was written whilst Newcastle was exiled in Antwerp and first published in French no doubt inspired by the earlier works of Antoine de Pluvinel (1555-1620) was the écuyer to Louis XIII of France.

² *“School of Horsemanship Part II: The Method of Training Horses According to the Different Ways in Which They Will Be Used”* by Francois Robichon de la Guérinière Xenophon Press 1992 p 66

³ *Ibid* n 2

by Philippe Karl⁴.

1. Shoulder-in on a circle:

The first task is to introduce yielding of the haunches on a circle in hand, then ridden, at the walk and then at the trot⁵. Whether carried out in hand or ridden, it is important to establish first a position which:

- has the correct mobilisation of the jaw and a light contact;
- transfers the weight off the forehand to the hind quarters by demi arrêt⁶ (hand without leg and as much as the horse will allow without stiffening or hollowing);
- a neutral (not pushing) seat if ridden; and
- inside bend.

With the correct starting position, the rider then uses the outside rein to ask the shoulders to take an inside track - a circle slightly smaller than the circle made by the hind legs. The outside rein is of course supported by the inside opening rein which maintains the bend. When executing shoulder-in on the circle, the weight of the rider is over the leg which bears most weight and makes the smallest circle, namely the inside foreleg.⁷

2. Shoulder-in on the straight line:

The shoulder-in on the straight line is introduced once the horse understands the balance of the shoulders and moves off the leg at the girth⁸. The challenge is not to overbend the horse or have the horse move “quarters out”. The weight of the rider, most importantly, is always in the direction of the movement⁹. Again, the rider first establishes the position (a light soft contact, inside bend and outside shoulder control, neutral seat) then requests the outside shoulder to come in off the track such that it forms 3 tracks as seen in *figure 1*. As the rider asks the outside shoulder to move off the track the rider’s weight is placed to the *outside* in direction of the movement whilst the shoulders of the rider follow the direction of the shoulder of the horse. The rider’s legs are used simply to help the horse not to step out or to help the inside hind to step in and across (depending on the asymmetry of the horse).

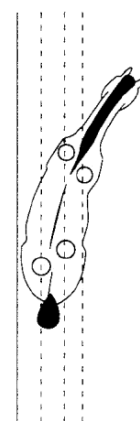


Figure 1 Shoulder-in

3. Correcting Asymmetry: Straightening the Horse

During shoulder-in it is expected that certain changes of angle and degree of neck bend will be required to cope with the asymmetry of the horse and to develop its straightness. For example: whether ridden or in hand, if the horse leans on the right shoulder (because the horse has natural left bend) then shoulder-in to the right will probably suffer from the horse tending to straighten the neck and lean into the circle and the hind legs will have the tendency to escape outwards. To correct the movement, we ask for the inside shoulder to lift and the left shoulder to accept more weight, then we ask for more neck bend to the inside but less angle on the line generally, so the haunches are not inclined to escape. If

⁴ *The Art of Riding* by Philippe Karl Cadmos 2009 pp 90, 91 *The Twisted Truths of Modern Dressage* by Philippe Karl Cadmos Publishing Ltd 6th Edn p 97

⁵ *The Art of Riding* by Philippe Karl Cadmos 2009 pp 90, 91

⁶ The French Demi Arrêt which rebalances the forehand to the hind quarters without the use of the driving seat or leg.

⁷ *The Twisted Truths of Modern Dressage* by Philippe Karl Cadmos Publishing Ltd 6th Edn p 99

⁸ *Op cit* n 5

⁹ *Op cit* n 7 p 97

the horse is ridden, then the rider's outside leg can control the haunches, limit the yielding or "keep them from stepping out". The same horse on the left rein is likely to offer too much bend, lean on the right shoulder, make the circle bigger and the quarters struggle to move under and across. To assist, we work on more angle (eg: work on 4 tracks) and ask for less bend. The outside rein is used to rebalance the right shoulder (to the left), we straighten the neck (which will probably be overbent) and we encourage the inside hind to step under and across with a tap of a whip to assist the leg if necessary.

Shoulder-in is introduced by degrees and a few steps at a time so that the newly activated muscles can adapt and strengthen.

The process of developing the horse's ability to rebalance and carry more weight on its hind quarters (through shoulder-in) takes time but, as it does so, the ability to "do" shoulder-in improves and the horse advances generally with stability and gymnastic ability. The more you practice, the more shoulder control you have and the lighter the forehand and more engaged and stronger the hind quarter and so on.

To Ride A Horse Forward It Must First Be Straight

It is of little value, even detrimental to the horse, to drive it forward continuously if the horse is crooked and / or remains heavy on the forehand. If shoulder-in can be used to help a horse rebalance and strengthen starting in hand and at the walk, then it can be used to help retrain the off the track thoroughbred, it can be used to start young horses in the correct self carriage, it can be used as a basic training tool for show jumpers where lightness and balance are essential to performance and of course, it can be used to make a circle round, a halt square and lines straight in preparatory, preliminary and novice dressage tests.

If shoulder-in is so beneficial then why don't we use it in more?

The Modern Purpose of Shoulder-in?

Modern training techniques, particularly modern dressage, (competition dressage) seem to underestimate the true value of shoulder-in. For example, Dressage NSW¹⁰ regards the shoulder-in as having the purpose of: "*making the horse attentive and obedient to the aids*" as well as: "*improving his balance, suppleness and powers of collection. ...*"¹¹. The stated Dressage NSW purpose for shoulder-in is at odds with the original purpose for shoulder-in.

Guérinière did not mention "*attentiveness or obedience to the aids*" probably because it is an assumed basic of all horsemanship. Further, is not *all* dressage directed towards "balance, suppleness and powers of collection" not just shoulder-in?

When to Start Shoulder-in in Modern Dressage?

It was good enough for Guérinière to introduce shoulder-in *at the walk*:

"once the horse has learned to trot freely in both directions on the circle and on the straight line,

¹⁰ Equestrian Australia (EA) Dressage Rules 2019

¹¹ <https://www.equestrian.org.au/dressage/movements>

to move at a calm and even walk on these same lines, has become accustomed to executing halts and half halts (demi arrets)¹² and carrying the head to the inside, it is then necessary to take him at a slow and slightly collected walk along the wall and place him such that his haunches make one line and his shoulder make another”¹³

In the modern environment, where basic horsemanship cannot be assumed, I would add four further prerequisites before starting shoulder-in:

1. **relaxation** - demonstrated by jaw mobilisation brought about by soft and steady rein contact and a tactful hand request¹⁴;
2. **a neutral (not pushing) seat and relaxed leg** (*Descente des jambes*);
3. **shoulder control** -the ability to execute a simple turns (starting with counter bend turns) using the outside rein and incorporating the ability to bend the neck while keeping the shoulders balanced; and
4. **Impulsion** (willingness to move off the leg).

Contrary to the recommendation of Guérinière, the Equestrian Australia (**EA**) Rulebook (**the EA Rulebook**) introduces shoulder-in at elementary level and at “collected” trot. It describes shoulder-in as follows-

The shoulder-in exercise is performed in collected trot. The horse is ridden with a slight but uniform bend around the inside leg of the rider, maintaining engagement and cadence at a constant angle of approximately 30 degrees. The horse’s inside foreleg passes and crosses in front of the outside foreleg; the inside hind leg steps forward under the horse’s body weight following the same track of the outside foreleg, with the lowering of the inside hip. The horse is bent away from the direction from which it is moving” (see figure 1).

Execution:

- Slight but uniform bend around inside leg of rider
- Approximately 30 degrees angle
- Inside foreleg passes and crosses in front of outside foreleg
- Inside hind leg steps forward under the horse’s body weight following same track as of outside foreleg
- Horse is bent away from direction in which it is travelling¹⁵

If you are a *competition* dressage rider in Australia, then your first exposure to shoulder-in is for an Elementary test and is usually taught *for that purpose*¹⁶. The poor Preparatory, Preliminary and Novice rider is expected to ride a perfect circle, a straight line and halt square without the benefit of shoulder-in to help them. Too hard. Those who are not disenfranchised by the process, start to look to short cuts and stronger aids to *make it happen* and wonder why the horse becomes “difficult” or “nervous”.

Difficulties with the Modern Approach to Shoulder-in

¹² “half halts” is translated from the French expression “Demi Arret” which is executed by the hand alone without any leg or forward push of the seat. Demi arret is a term of art in French classical dressage closely tied to the notion that the hand acts without the leg and the leg acts without the hand.

¹³ *Op cit n 2*

¹⁴ The method of teaching the horse to relax its jaw on contact of the bit is a subject of additional instruction at Ecole de Légèreté. It is part of the process of establishing “mise en main” or education to the bit essential to basic training.

¹⁵ <https://www.equestrian.org.au>. Explanatory Notes for Judges and Riders Final pdf; and Rule 2.12.1 of the EA Rules 2019

¹⁶ Rule 2.12.1 of the EA Rules 2019 <https://www.equestrian.org.au/sites/default/files/19%20Feb%20-%203B%20-%20Final%2014-3-19.pdf>

Difficulties arise when trying to ride shoulder-in as introduced in the EA Rulebook:

1. The horse has no chance of being able to flex and carry at trot if it has not been introduced to the movement at walk and had a chance to develop the appropriate carrying musculature and address any asymmetry.
2. How can the horse be “collected” in trot without first being able to carry (which is taught by the shoulder-in at walk)? Shoulder-in creates the ability to collect, not the other way around.
3. The movement set out in the EA Rulebook is not capable of being performed properly as it is now well known that the horse does not “bend around the leg”. The spine of a horse is unable to do so. It would be more correct to say that “*shoulder-in should be executed with correct transverse rotation of the spine and never with inverse transverse rotation*”¹⁷.

Why is there a Problem with Modern Shoulder-in?

Modern dressage tests (under the EA Rules) are designed to test the horse developed through the German training system which system does not incorporate the lessons taught by Guérinière. The German training system is set out in:

1. *The General Principles of Riding: Basic Training for the Horse and Rider (Book 1)*; and
2. *The Advanced Techniques of Dressage (Book 2)* ¹⁸.

Both texts are translations of the official instruction handbooks of the German National Equestrian Federation. Book 1 devotes a whole three and a half pages to shoulder-in (not including cross referencing) and Book 2 devotes four pages but treats lateral movements generally in greater depth. Again, the significance of the shoulder-in seems to have been overlooked.

In Book 2, the aids for shoulder-in are¹⁹:

1. “The rider uses half halts²⁰ to start the exercise;
2. More weight is placed on the inside seat-bone;
3. The (rider’s) inside leg is placed next the girth to push the horse forward and sideways, keeps it (the horse) bent through the ribs and makes it take more weight onto the horse’s inside hind foot;
4. The (rider’s) outside leg is placed behind the girth in a ‘guarding’ position, and prevents the horse’s outside leg from swinging out;
5. The inside rein, which has been shortened, leads the forehand in from the track at the beginning of the exercise, and, along with the inside legs, is responsible for maintaining a uniform bend.
6. The outside. ‘guarding’ rein yields slightly to allow the horse to move its outside shoulder forward but must still keep the flexion within acceptable limits.”

In summary the fundamental differences between the modern French and modern German approaches

¹⁷ https://www.scienceofmotion.com/shoulder_in.html

¹⁸ Kenilworth Press an imprint of Quiller Pty Ltd 2017 pp172 -175 (Book 1) and Kenilworth Press an imprint of Quiller Pty Ltd 2000 pp 42 - 46 (Book 2)

¹⁹ *Ibid* n 18 Book 2 p 42

²⁰ The term “half halt” used in the modern dressage context refers to the use of rein and leg at the same time it is the fundamental difference between French classical method and modern or German dressage training.

to shoulder-in are:

- The purpose of the movement;
- The time of introduction of the movement;
- The need to “drive” with the inside leg; and
- The rein and weight aids.

Why Does the German Training Of Shoulder-In Differ From French Shoulder-In?

The German training principles (Books 1 and 2) are *purported* to be based on the lessons German écuyer, Gustav Steinbrecht²¹ (1808 -1885) (**Steinbrecht**). In Steinbrecht’s lessons, shoulder-in is given substantial and detailed treatment²² and (encouragingly) refers to the French and English methods taught by Newcastle and Guérinière²³. Like the modern French method, Steinbrecht emphasises the importance of the *outside* rein to control the outside shoulder and outside leg to control the hind quarters and prevent “quarters out”²⁴. Steinbrecht uses the inside rein only for maintaining the bend²⁵ and (contrary to Book 1 and Book 2), Steinbrecht also recommends weight to the *outside* of the horse²⁶, in line with the direction of travel, to assist with the “*correct and unforced stepping of the inside hind leg*”. Book 1 and Book 2 clearly require the weight to be on *the inside* of the bend and the leg to *drive* the horse sideways and forward.

It is not clear why there has been a change to the use of the inside rein, weight distribution and need to drive the inside hind leg between the publication of Steinbrecht’s text and the current German textbooks. Perhaps it is to do with the intervening publication of *The German Cavalry Manual on the Training of Horse and Rider* H Div. 12 Berlin (1937) and the then rivalry between French and German countrymen. Most likely the explanation for the differential treatment of shoulder-in in modern dressage is found in the essential difference, generally, between the French and German training methods.

Balance through Movement vs Balance before Movement

The modern German approach assumes that the horse is first and foremost rebalanced **though movement** brought about by a driving seat and leg into a restraining/guiding hand. Steinbrecht himself wrote that the rider had to “*devote his undivided attention to working the hind legs particularly the hip and knee joints and the horse had to find its new balance under the rider through forward movement brought about by leg aids*”²⁷. Shoulder-in does not seem to be an integral part of the rebalancing process in the German training system. Instead, the shoulder-in seems more of a test as to whether the horse has *been* rebalanced. If shoulder-in is not seen as a tool to assist the horse to rebalance and strengthen then it can be understood why it has a small role to play in modern dressage.

The classical French method taught at Ecole de Légèreté, requires the horse to be rebalanced **before movement** and shoulder-in is integral to that end. The classical French method develops stabilising musculature as well as the gymnastic locomotive muscles from the very beginning of training. It seeks

²¹ An English translation: *The Gymnasium of the Horse*. Xenophon Press 2017

²² *Ibid* n 21 pp 149 – 164 inclusive

²³ *Ibid* n 21 p 149

²⁴ *Quarters out with inside bend is counterproductive and sets up inverse transvers rotation*

²⁵ *Op cit* n 21 pp 23, 153

²⁶ *Op cit* n 21 p 150

²⁷ *Op cit* n 21 p 49

to rebalance the horse, lighten the forehand and establish the correct position of the horse (vertical and horizontal balance) before and during forward movement.

Biomechanically, a horse with a collapsed wither or asymmetry, cannot ever be made light and straight simply by being “driven” forward. The Modern training method works against the biomechanics of the horse²⁸ and only works if the horse is naturally gifted. The classical French method has a wider application as it can be used for to develop horses which do not have perfect conformation, or which need remediation (horses which cannot be “driven”).

A rider who uses shoulder-in according to the classical French method, to help develop their horse slowly and from the very beginning of its training, will have a horse which is more relaxed and less likely to shy or become “difficult”. Once the horse is balanced and strong then the higher-level dressage movements, jumping and related athletic activities, will come more naturally and with greater ease.

Modern dressage could benefit from a reappraisal and reintroduction of French simplicity and elegance into its training principles and many horses would thank us for it.

End.



²⁸ *The Twisted Truths of Modern Dressage* by Philippe Karl. Cadmos Publishing Limited 6th Edn 2017 pp 96 - 98