

SLOUCH NO MORE

By Debbie Rodriguez with Natalie DeFee Mendik

Photos by Patricia Worth, WO Equine Marketing

'Shoulders back' is a refrain that spans the disciplines. Just about every rider has at some point been instructed to correct the shoulders.

There are several possible reasons for less than ideal upper-body posture. A past injury may have left you with pain or scar tissue that affects your position. You may have a job with repetitive motion that strongly develops one side and one range of motion (think stall cleaning). Sitting at a desk or driving the kids around all day may just leave you inactive much of the time.

Regardless of the reason for poor posture, correct shoulders are one more key element to riding at your best. Shoulders should be level and open. This correct posture not only looks great, but it also serves a functional element by allowing the rider to stay supple in the elbows and wrist for a soft, independent connection with the reins.

Part of correct alignment on the horse includes keeping the neck in alignment. For dressage and western riders, the ears should be over the shoulders. For hunter, jumper and eventer riders, proper neck alignment allows for the ever important 'eyes up.'

Slouching is known in technical jargon as upper cross syndrome. As the pectorals on the front of the chest tighten, the muscles across the upper back become weaker. The shoulders are drawn down and forward. The correction for this includes work from all angles, which increases mobility and range of motion while strengthening the muscles across the back and shoulders to maintain the position.

In the saddle, warming up with shoulder and neck exercises not only opens your shoulders, but also gets the kinks out and releases some of the tension many of us hold in our



Head Rolls. Start your head roll by dropping your chin to your chest. Roll your head sideways with your ear toward your shoulder, back, toward the opposite shoulder & again to your chest. Repeat & then reverse direction.



Single Arm Circles. With one hand holding the reins, rotate arm in a backwards circle, using full range of motion.



Double Arm Circles. For riders on a trustworthy mount, both arms can be worked simultaneously. This exercise opens the chest while bringing the shoulder blades down & back. Be sure to engage your core & stretch tail.



Overhead Press. Standing with feet shoulder-width apart & a light weight in each hand, start with your elbows bent & parallel to your shoulders. Raise weights overhead in a smooth, controlled movement. Return to shoulder height. Repeat.



Shoulder Retraction: Upright Row. Standing with your feet slightly apart, bent forward at 45° angle at the hips & knees softly bent, let arms hand with weights directly beneath the shoulders. Lift arms by raising elbows up & back, retracting shoulder blades together. Return arms to original position & repeat.

shoulders. These exercises are simple and take just a few minutes. You may have done these on the lunge line, but if your horse is reliable and there are no spooky distractions around, go ahead and try them while your horse walks around the arena.

A few exercises you can easily do at home with no equipment that will increase your range of motion and strengthen your shoulder girdle are the overhead press and shoulder retractions. A few minutes of stretching and strengthening daily will show clear improvement in the range of motion and control you have in the shoulders, improving your posture in the saddle.

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