

Unlocking the Shoulders

One of the most prevalent problems encountered in achieving a correct runwalk, is what I call the locked shoulder. Often it's not just the shoulder but the neck and jaw as well. The locked shoulder inhibits the horse's ability to roll and reach with their front end as well as reduces the natural headshake counter-balance for the driving backend.

In a well-executed flatfoot walk and running walk, the head is at its lowest point of the headshake while both front hooves are directly beneath the point of the shoulders. To accommodate this correct position the shoulders must roll, just as a human must roll their hips as they walk with a long stride. If you walk without rolling your hips, your stride is dramatically reduced and the same holds true horses with their shoulders. By unlocking and rolling the shoulders he will not only increase his reach and headshake, but enhance his balance, increase over-all stride as well becoming more relaxed and energy efficient in his gait. Below are some exercises that will immediately benefit a horse with locked shoulders, and teach your horse to use himself in a loose and rolling gait.

It is vital that your horse keeps his head in a lowered position while executing the "gives" and all lateral work.

- "Drop Your Head" - I teach young horses a "drop your head" cue early in their training to get them started. While this cue initially begins as a simple "lower your head" or, as John Lyons calls it, "a calm-down cue" since horses naturally relax more with their head lowered, it can also evolve with the horse's training into a "follow the bit" cue. I start teaching this while at a stop, allowing the horse to learn it in pieces. I sit on their back with a snaffle bit in their mouth, and begin to waggle the bit. This is NOT a sawing motion, but a slight wiggling using only my forefingers on the reins with just enough tension to keep the slack out. I never want to hurt his mouth, just be a little annoying. I don't want him to be uncomfortable, but I don't want him to ignore me either. I continue to waggle the bit until the horse starts trying to figure out what I'm asking him to do and begins to move his head around. As soon as I see *any downward movement* of the poll and ears, I *quickly* stop the waggle and drop the reins loose. I wait a few moments, stroking the neck to let him know that was what I wanted, then repeat. Remember: the quicker you are in your release the easier it is for the horse to associate your release with what he did, and the quicker that horse will learn. The horse quickly figures out that every time he moves his head downward the waggle stops. After we have learned this cue at a stop, I begin to slowly walk the horse and re-teach the cue in motion. This is something they usually pick up very

quickly. A lower head carriage has a multitude of benefits for the gaited horse beyond unlocking the shoulder that are far too numerous to go into here.

- "The Give" - From the saddle, you must get them to "give" to the bit. Sometimes it is also easier to get a "give" to the side first (laterally) before asking for the vertical "give". I'm not talking about pulling them in and forcing a headset, but a "give" *by the horse*. Ask your horse to bring his nose down and in toward his chest or to the side at his shoulder point (never up toward the neck)... Again, start this exercise at a stop first. Break it down and first get him to give his nose, then once it's become a learned response to your cue, start the horse walking and re-teach it at motion. I recommend working this exercise in a snaffle bit because of the direct rein action and pressure is less confusing than that of the leveraged curb bit.
- "The Shoulder In" - Once you have a "give" at the walk we then add lateral (side) movement of the horses feet. Using leg pressure, ask your horse to move a step laterally while going forward at a slow walk. I will often ask for a "give" toward the right shoulder and use right leg pressure to get a small step toward the left/forward (10:00 o'clock). Be happy and reward any small effort, stop and praise your horse. This can be very confusing for some horses that have never been asked for lateral movement before. So as soon as they make that step toward 10:00 o'clock, release and praise, then repeat. After a couple of steps you'll soon get a half dozen. Your goal is to get the front legs to cross as they step: the right leg moving in front of the left when going to 10:00 o'clock. Remember to work to both directions equally at first. You may eventually learn that your horse has a tendency to lock up more on one side than the other and can use this to loosen that side more. This will tax new muscles so do this exercise in small doses at first. Our goal is not to make your horse sore, but relax his shoulder carriage. This exercise is very similar to a dressage "shoulder in" movement.

Once you have a learned and repeatable, lateral movement you have a very useful tool to loosen the shoulders. When you feel the tight shoulders as you're gaiting, slow down to a walk and ask for a few steps of this lateral motion in each direction then resume your gait *and feel how loose your horse gets*. The looseness may not last for long, maybe just a few strides at first, but it's a start, and as with anything you can build from there. It's important that the "give" as well as the lowered head is used in conjunction with the lateral steps, you need the rounding of the neck and loosening of the jaw to encourage the shoulders to unlock. If a horse is tight in his jaw or neck it becomes very difficult for him to loosen in the shoulders. It's a whole picture, and a balanced use of the entire body. Good luck.