

Fixing Arm Problems VS 'Pulling Shoulders Back'

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It is Medal season again and riders want to look their best. It is a common belief in our society that good posture is arching the spine and pulling the shoulders back. Skaters, dancers, soldiers and riders aspire to this posture.

However, pulling the shoulders back causes stiffening of the spine, elbows and often the hands. If a rider is pulling their shoulders back they are often also told to soften the elbows, shorten the reins and relax. In correct riding posture, the middle back should never be arched. Arching the back blocks the ability of the spine to follow the horse and tightens the back muscles, usually causing back pain at the base of the rib cage or in the lower back.

This most often occurs in the sitting trot and the release position and is especially common in young female riders. Pulling the shoulders back also engages the Lattissimus Dorsi, or Lats, muscle. The lats are actually arm muscles, attaching just below the shoulder. Since they also attach to the lower half of the spine, pulling the



shoulders back stiffens the arm and the back at the same time. This makes it impossible to soften the elbow and keep the reins short.

So try instead to imagine a pole in the very middle of you. Lengthen all four sides of you evenly on that pole, chin slightly tucked as if nodding 'yes'. Roll the shoulders forward-up-back in a circle then slowly let the shoulders relax down, BUT DO NOT allow them to slide forward again. This should feel as if the shoulders are open and the collar bones wide, but without any increased tension in the neck or spine. Now hold this position of the shoulder blades as you slowly reach both arms forward and back as if reaching toward your horse's ears. The arms should move freely without any movement of the shoulder blades.

To practice the release position, keep tall along the pole in the middle of you as it tips to allow your hips to slide back in space and your arms to reach forward. Do not let 'the pole' slouch or arch. This requires core muscle activation. If you feel more tension in your back than in your tummy you have allowed your middle back to arch.

Practice these two exercises often through the day. Just two or three reps, five to six times per day will help your riding position and core muscles immensely!

Stop pulling your shoulders back and ride like a winner!

Photo Credit Sandra Sokoloski