



## Tim Lewthwaite Riding Instruction: Lesson #4

### SHOULDER-IN

#### BUILDING STRENGTH AND BALANCE

The shoulder in is a foundation lateral exercise that is used to strengthen the horse's hind legs and to ask the horse to use them in a way that will lead to increased collection. It is an exercise that leads to other more advanced exercises, so in a very real way, it is the cornerstone on which you will build a more athletic horse. Earlier exercises taught the horse to engage his hind legs in response to the rider's aids. They improved his understanding of the aids, responsiveness and balance - paving the way for exercises that will build his strength.



#### WHAT THE HORSE DOES

The horse will flex either right or left - depending on which rein you are doing the shoulder in. His shoulders will come off the track as if you are starting a turn or a circle. As the horse's shoulders come "in" the rider will ask him to stay on a straight line. Viewed from the front, it will look like the horse is traveling on three tracks. The outside hind leg is the first track. By moving his shoulder in, his outside foreleg will come inline with his inside hind leg - track two. His inside foreleg will make the third track. The horse will increasingly flex the joints of his inside hind leg as he reaches further under his body and center of gravity and begins to carry more weight on the leg. When the horse is worked on both reins in this way, he will increase the strength of both hind legs. This will allow the horse to sit back and use his haunches to a greater degree. As he shifts more weight back, he will be able to raise his back up to the rider, lift through the withers and free his forehead/shoulders. As this happens, he will be able to offer a better frame and move with greater power and freedom over his top-line.

The difference between a leg yield and a shoulder in is that in shoulder in, the horse's hind legs don't cross at all, and there is only a very slight cross over with his forelegs. In the leg yield, both the hind legs and the forelegs cross.

#### WHAT THE RIDER DOES

1. As the horse's shoulder comes off the track, continue to look straight down the ring with your head.



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Your shoulders should mirror the horse's shoulders - they turn in to the same degree that the horse's shoulders turn in.

2. Place more weight in the outside seat bone. This should be relatively close to the horse's spine.
3. Open the inside knee joint and with the lower leg at the girth, ask the horse to remain on the track. The opening of the knee, will "scoop" the inside seat bone forwards. Ask and then relax the inside leg aid and then ask again as needed. The ultimate goal is to get the horse to recognize the change in your overall position and offer the movement when your position changes. The inside leg can then be used to refresh the movement if needed.
4. Outside leg is drawn back but remains quiet.
5. Half halt with the outside rein both to keep the horse on line and to regulate his rhythm as needed.
6. Inside hand can fine-tune the flexion, but the outside hand is the active hand. If the exercise is being ridden correctly, and the horse is using his inside hind leg, the flexion will be there.

## HOW TO RIDE THE SHOULDER IN

As with most new exercises, start off in walk. It allows you to think through the progression of aids and also react to what your horse is doing in a timely manner so that he has a better chance of understanding what is being asked of him. Once you are both comfortable with the exercise in walk, move up to trot.

Ride around the outside of the ring. As you come to the end of one of the short sides of the ring, ride a ten-meter circle. This will put the horse in the correct bend and flexion. At the point the horse reaches the track to go down the long side, allow his shoulders to leave the track as if he is going to do another circle, but apply the aids for him to move down the long side in shoulder in.

As you become more practiced at the shoulder in, you can do it without the circle as preparation. When you feel the exercise is established along the edge of the ring, move away from the track and see if you can maintain a straight line without the support of the rail.



### THREE TRACKS OF SHOULDER-IN

*In these two photos Ear's is moving directly towards the photographer in shoulder in at the trot. Note that he is flexed to the right as if he is turning. You can distinctly see the three tracks of the shoulder in. The outside hind leg - in this case, Ear's left hind - is track #1. The inside hind leg coupled with the outside foreleg make up track #2. The inside foreleg - his right front - is track #3.*



It's better to start with a few good strides of shoulder in than a lot of bad strides. So start with a few strides and, over time, work to increase the number of strides.

### SOME COMMON FAULTS

1. Like the leg yield, the most common fault I find with the shoulder in, is when the horse has an over-bent neck to the inside. This allows him to fall out through his outside shoulder. When he does this, he pushes off with his inside hind leg without really engaging it, and his weight falls onto his outside shoulder - the exact opposite of what you are trying to achieve. You may be able to maintain a straight line with the horse bent in this way, but he will not be doing shoulder in because there will be no engagement of the inside hind. Without the engagement of the inside hind leg, there will be no benefit from the exercise.

When this happens, stop for a moment, and think what has happened. Are you being too heavy with your inside rein and pulling the horse's head around, or is he avoiding working his inside hind leg by evading himself. If you are the cause, stop pulling on the inside rein when you start your next attempt. If it is the horse, be prepared to keep his neck straighter with your outside rein when you ask for the engagement of the inside hind.

2. Another common fault is to have too much angle in the horse's body (i.e.: if the horse is flexed to the right in a shoulder in right and his haunches swing to the left). When this happens the horse will be compelled to cross his hind legs - the result is that you end up in a leg yield. This is why it is useful to start the exercise along the rail, as it will provide a physical barrier to help control the haunches. The rider should also make sure that they aren't pulling on the inside rein.

### CAN YOU SPOT THE PROBLEM WITH THIS SHOULDER IN?

*Ears is in shoulder in right and moving down the ring towards the photographer. He has a reasonable flexion to the right. I am looking down the ring in the direction of movement as I am supposed to ... so with all this going right, what could be wrong?*

*Look at Ears' legs. He is on four tracks and his body angle is verging on being too steep - as a result his hind legs are starting to cross over. If he were to swing his haunches further to his left, we'd be in a leg yield as he would have to cross his inside (right) legs in front of the outside (left) legs to stay on this line.*

*Now, there's nothing wrong with leg yielding down the ring, but it is not a shoulder in.*

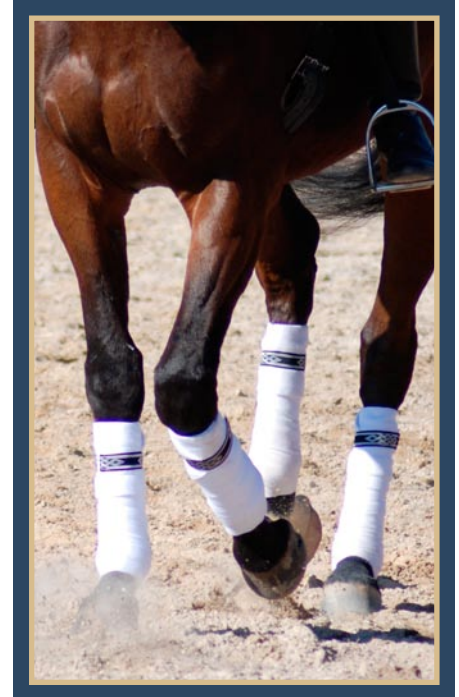




## SHOULDER-IN: A SOLUTION FOR THE STIFF HORSE?

You will often ride a horse that seems to move with power, grace and balance on one rein, but when you change directions, the horse suddenly gets stiff and unbalanced. There can be a variety of causes, but one common reason is that the horse is weaker in one hind leg and stronger in the other.

If the horse is stiff to the left, the cause can be that he is stronger on his left hind leg than he is on his right. That may seem strange at first, but here is the reason. As he comes onto the left rein, his weaker right hind leg will be to the outside. He won't want to keep that foot grounded quite as long as the stronger left hind. By reducing the time he wants to stay on his weak leg, he reduces the time that his stronger leg is coming forwards - thus limiting it's ability to engage further under his body. The stronger leg also has more muscle tone and as a result he may be a bit raised through his quarters on that side as well as being stiffer in that leg (imagine a body builder - all muscles, but not very flexible). All these things can combine to make him get stiff and lose his balance as he changes rein.



At the age of four, when his training started, Ears was stiff to the left and balanced to the right - weak right and strong left. By a consistent regime of shoulder in, he became even behind. Once that happened, he could change directions in the trot without losing his rhythm or balance.

Shoulder in is a regular part of Ear's warm-up routine and I even use it well into a ride.

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