

Benefits of Schooling Shoulder-Fore

By Danica Yates

Shoulder-fore is a term for schooling a shoulder-in with less angle. It is an incredibly useful exercise for getting the horse straight and balanced off the inside leg to outside rein. The emphasis is not on producing great angle, but in optimally balancing and collecting the horse. Shoulder-fore and shoulder-in are valuable tools for achieving an ultimately through horse. The beauty of classical dressage, is that movements build upon each other. As the horse and rider advance in their education, schooling different exercises or movements helps ever refine the aids and communication in the partnership. The movements are not just 'tricks' but exercises to improve connection. Shoulder-fore is a good basic exercise to help develop balance, straightness and collection.

The 'amount of angle' in a shoulder-fore refers to how far the shoulders come off the rail or straight track. A true classical shoulder-in should be performed on three tracks: the inside front foot makes one, the diagonal outside front and inside hind two, and the outside hind three. It is becoming more common to see shoulder-in performed and accepted on four tracks: each foot on its own line of travel. In practicing shoulder-fore our aim is to help the horse balance and engage the inside hind leg. You will find that for the optimal effect to this end, the horse must travel on three tracks or slightly less. When the outside front and the inside hind are on the same track, it enables the inside hind leg to step under and push more - which is a major goal of collection. Falling in to four tracks, the horse actually loses engagement of the inside hind leg as it goes across instead of stepping under the horse's body. Collection is achieved by the hind legs stepping underneath the body, the inside hind in particular.

Horses naturally tend to travel with their haunches in as they proceed around the ring. Dressage is a discipline that seeks to encourage the horse, who naturally carries more weight on their forehand, to engage and carry more weight on the hind legs. To encourage him to do this, we must help him become straight without the haunches drifting in. Even from a young age, dressage horses should be taught to track straight. 'Thinking shoulder-fore' will help achieve this. This is particularly helpful in the canter where there is more of a tendency for the haunches to drift in. Again, the emphasis is not on producing angle so much as getting the haunches underneath the horse to enable him to track straight.

Basic balance in dressage is achieved through use of the inside leg and outside rein. There are many other elements taught to riders to balance a horse, including weight, 'sit bones,' hand techniques, etc. At the end of the day, to help the horse travel straight, the rider

must be sitting straight, and have good leg to hand connection. On a circle, the horse's tendencies in falling off balance will generally be falling in against the rider's inside leg or falling out through his outside shoulder. (Occasionally a horse will swing his haunches out, in which case a travers positioning would be most beneficial). To prevent the falling in, the rider can use her inside leg to ask the horse to step off that side, and then must 'catch' the energy from falling out by closing the outside rein. The inside hand can be used with indirect pressure, by opening the rein. But the outside hand ideally should be used with direct connection, simply closing the fist tighter to increase the pressure. To ask for shoulder-fore on the long side, it is simply a combination of these aids- inside leg at the girth tells the horse to stay on the rail, outside rein asks the shoulders to move in off the track. Keeping a slight bend is necessary to have the horse's body arcing around the inside leg but too much bend will just pop the shoulders out within the angle and must be corrected with more outside hand closing.



To maximize the collecting, straightening and balancing benefits of schooling the shoulder-fore, it is best done on three tracks or with slightly less angle.

Developing a good shoulder-in will earn you points in your second and third level tests, but much more than that, the fundamentals of balancing the horse from your inside leg to outside rein will improve your communication and connection allowing you to excel in the art of dressage.

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