

Why Do You Ride

Photos, This Page: Rider/Trainer Tim Malin & Coolio. Coolio's canter pirouette is a good demonstration of a horse that is light in the bridle and carrying his weight on his hind end . . . & proof of Tim's educated, 'feeling' use of his hands & arms. Still, Tim says sympathetically, "At some time or another, all of us have ridden with stiff arms."

Photos by Who Took That Photography (at upper left) & SusanJStickle.com (lower right).

With Stiff Arms?

Timothy F. Malin and Coolio stepped into the Grand Prix Dressage ring two years ago and they've never looked back. Having earned his Bronze, Silver and Gold Medals, Tim approaches his education and goals with a laser-like focus. Ranked among the top 16 Grand Prix level pairs in the U.S. last year, Tim and Coolio earned a spot at the National Championships and placed 13th in the National Grand Prix at Gladstone. International competition looms on the horizon. Tim runs his business, Golden Mean, LLC, in Wellington, Florida, and in South Windsor, Connecticut.

With a background in sports psychology and knowledge of the Alexander Technique (for improving a rider's physical abilities), Tim is an exceptional coach. This year Tim will work with (among others) Patricia Goldblatt and her amateur rides Negria, DiAngelo and Tiramisu.

The First Two Causes

"We've all gone down the wrong path a few times," Tim states comfortingly. "Sometimes I watch another rider and think, 'Is there a little bit of that flaw in me?' You become aware of a problem when you see it magnified in someone else's riding... and then you can work on fixing it."

"At some time or another, all of us have ridden with stiff arms. But *why*? I've made a list of the five most basic reasons for riders to lock their arms against their horses."

Reason #1: "The first reason is a fear issue, a knee-jerk reaction. Something intimidates the rider; clutching is her mechanical

**A
Grand
Prix
Dressage
Rider
Explains
Why
You're
Locking
Your
Elbows**



Photo At Left: This rider's shoulders & arms appear tense, & the horse reacts with an open mouth, stiffened neck & swishing tail. Tim describes one possible cause of locked arms: "The rider isn't getting what she wanted, so she applies the aid harder & constantly. She never lets go." Of course, a photograph is only one moment frozen in time... this rider may soften her arms & shoulders in the next frame. Maurine L. Webb photograph.

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Stiff Arms?

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reaction. If you look at this rider from the side, you'll see her hollow out her body's profile by rounding her shoulder, dropping her pelvis forward and pulling her arms back. Her horse ends up on his forehead. The whole thing snowballs, with the rider relying more and more on her upper arm strength and the horse leaning harder and harder.

"What is this rider afraid of? She could be overmounted. She doesn't feel that she has control. A trainer can teach her horse to be more obedient, bringing this horse within his rider's skill set. Meanwhile, the rider might practice on a different horse, hopefully learning to relax her arms.

"The rider might feel overfaced by the height of the jumps she's jumping, or by the level she's showing in the dressage arena. She might be recovering emotionally from a riding accident or concerned with making a mistake. Back it down a level or two, until the task is within the rider's comfort zone.

"Riders need enough stimulus, enough challenge, that they don't feel their riding has become stagnant. To that extent, it's good to work outside your comfort zone. Yet the rider should never feel so stressed or overwhelmed that locked elbows become her defense."

Reason #2: "The second possible reason for riding with stiff arms is a lack of awareness within yourself. Some people ride mechanically. They need to learn to be aware of feedback from their own bodies (and, eventually, from the horse) in order to improve. This rider is not getting feedback on what her own body is doing.

"Riding is more than position and commands to the horse. You need a connection within yourself before you can find the connection to the horse called 'feel.' Stand on the ground and hold your reins, with a friend holding the horse's end of the reins. Can you accurately judge the application and release of pressure? You must perceive the amount of muscle tension in your arm. You have to feel yourself *apply* the rein aids. You have to feel yourself *release* the rein aids.

"Only then can you learn to feel the horse respond to the aids. You're trying to give a rein aid and feel what you accomplished with it—did you create a lighter horse? Tell him 'good boy!' Be aware when you've produced a positive reaction and, equally, when the horse's reaction is negative. Is the horse still feeling tanky or heavy? You'll address that, but at least now you know that you've given the aid, released the aid, and judged the horse's response."

The Aid, Then The Response

"Many people believe that there is an instant relationship between applying the aid and the horse's reaction. Not true," Tim warns. "The reaction comes *after* the aid. The horse responds after—not during—the application phase. You have to give the rein aid and *then let the aid go!* Allow the horse to go on, more balanced from the rein aid.

"That is part of our Number Two explanation for locked arms. The rider isn't getting what she wanted, so she applies

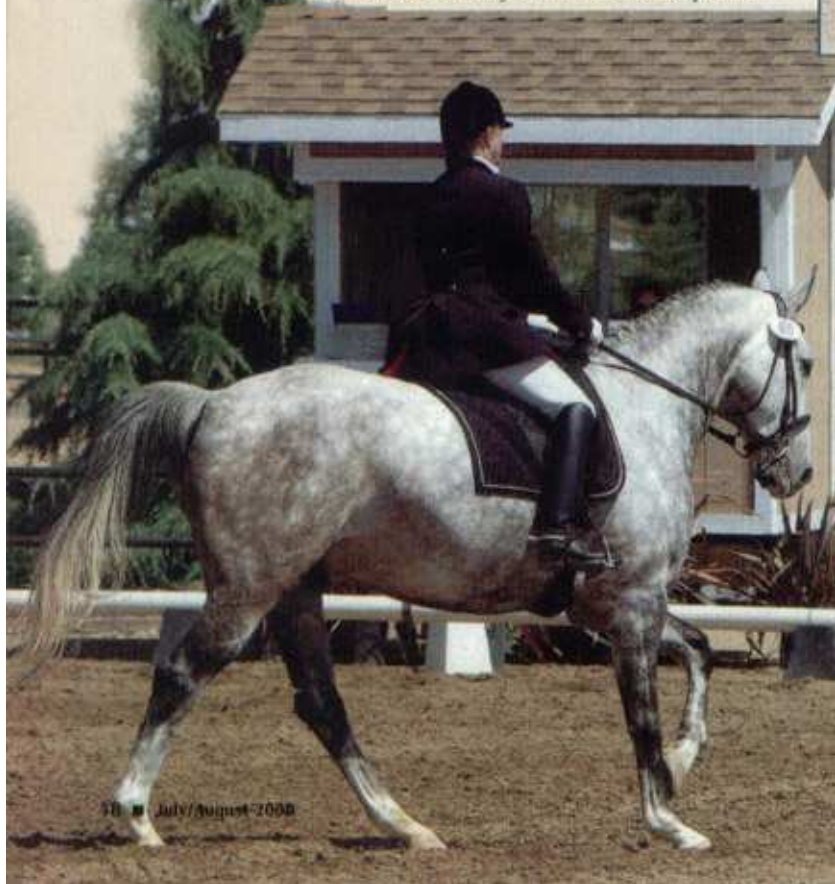
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Top Three Photos: In the top left photo, the rider's shoulders are beginning to hunch upwards towards her ears; her elbows & arms appear tense. In the second photo, the horse has lost his connection & the rider's entire body becomes stiff. Will she lock her elbows? By the third photo, horse & rider have reestablished communication, though the rider's shoulders are still bunched up. Scarbrough Studios photos.



Two Photos Below: These horses seem attentive, communicating well with their riders. Both riders illustrate a correct, straight line from the bit, through the rein & forearm, to the elbow. "Every horse must learn to carry his weight on his hind end & wait for your communication," Tim says. Maurine L. Webb photos.



Tim Malin & Golden Mean Dressage

During decades of training and showing hunters and jumpers, professional horseman Timothy Malin kept his eye on the dressage ring. Tim and his "A" Junior and Amateur clients won plenty, while Tim studied dressage to improve his flatwork.

Then Tim reassessed. "The focus of my business was preparing hunters and jumpers in the quest for awards," Tim says. "I felt I had lost a bit of my reason for wanting to ride for myself. In 2000, I decided it was my time, and I wanted to do something with my dressage." Tim's new aim was true. Training with two-time Olympic rider Ashley Holzer since 2002, Tim seems unstoppable. In '06, Tim and Coolio took home the USDF All Breeds Holsteiner Intermediaire 2 Championship and the Grand Prix Reserve Championship. That year Coolio also won AHHA's Intermediaire 2 Championship and was the Grand Prix Reserve.

The pair earned even better scores in Grand Prix, Specials and Freestyles in '07. Their expertise took them to the National Grand Prix Championships at USET Headquarters at Gladstone, where they placed thirteenth in the '07 Collecting Gaits Farm/USEF National Grand Prix. Tim and Coolio were also the All-Breeds AHHA Open Grand Prix Reserve Champions and All-Breeds AHHA Musical Freestyle Grand Prix Champions for 2007.

Tim has recently obtained sponsorship from Waldhausen and Thinline, and has been sponsored by the American Horse Trials Foundation.

"We're doing the Olympic Selection Trials and the National this year, I hope," Tim says. "I'm always working to take my riding to the next level." ■

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the aid harder, and constantly. She never lets go. She thinks she's still trying for a response from the horse, but . . .

"What do you do when someone talks to you constantly and never stops, and you never get a chance to respond? At some point, you stop listening. You simply stop participating. A horse ignores or resists an aid that's held too long; he stops listening for the same reason you would.

"If you push against a horse's shoulder as he stands in the barn aisle, he'll move over. But if you keep on pushing, the horse will learn to lean against you. There is the temptation to keep your leg on a lazy horse all the time, but the horse will either stiffen against you or stop responding to the aid that is held too long.

"When you are training a horse, you have to give him a chance to pass or fail. An amateur may only want to get it all done somehow, but a trainer wants the horse to understand. The trainer will instruct the horse consistently so that the horse will learn to respond consistently. Do you see how keeping your arms stiff locks the horse onto an aid in such a way that he's not going to respond?"

More Reasons For Locked Arms

Reason #3: "Imbalances or weaknesses in the rider's pelvis or core can cause bad habits in the mechanical aspects of riding. You need more riding time if you plan to solve this problem on your horse.

"Luckily, if your riding time is limited, cross-training can help to correct the missing link within your body mechanics. The Alexander Technique, Pilates, Rolfing, Yoga . . . there are many methods. The Alexander Technique, which I use, is a muscular relaxation approach. Riders misuse and over-use certain muscle groups. To improve your body mechanics, you must inhibit the old patterns of movement, then establish new patterns of muscle use.

"Rolfing looks at the body as a vertical stack of boxes. Do you drop one shoulder which, in turn, pushes the opposite hip out? Now you know what you have to straighten and strengthen. Our sport is less likely to injure you if you correct your foundation, your structure. Pilates and yoga encourage improved balance, flexibility and core strength, too.

"Riders, it's never too late to improve. There's no limit to how long you can continue to develop yourself, to grow."

Reason #4: "You're locking your arms

because your horse wants to lean on the bit . . . some horses are just going to go there. The rider becomes numb in his arms and reactions as he tries to hold on to all this thrust. But why is the horse leaning on the bit?

"Faulty conformation may make it difficult for the horse to balance properly, or to use his hindquarters and back well. A very downhill horse is going to have serious trouble lifting his poll and shoulders.

"There's the horse's personality. Some horses are alpha personalities who have learned to take over.

"Also, investigate any training issues your horse may have. All horses need balancing exercises. Every horse must learn to carry his weight on his hind end and wait for your communication. When the horse is able to carry himself and has been trained to wait for the rein aid, he should decrease his tendency of leaning on the bit.

"Lastly, soundness. A horse that is in pain, especially behind, won't want to carry his weight on his hind end. If your horse isn't developing as he should—or he's actually losing ground in his training—call the vet. Find out why. Leaning on the bit isn't the root problem."

Reason #5: "Lack of training and/or knowledge in the rider or the horse. They are pulling on each other because they don't know what else to do! The horse is leaning as he tries to develop a better balance, or has not received the systematic training to instill a different response. A horse who doesn't understand any other way to do something will take the easy way out. His trainer needs to give this horse a new menu selection—one that's better than leaning on the rider's arms.

"I once trained a hunter that had to do 50—and I mean that—trot/halt and canter/walk transitions before jumping. Give him those downward transitions, and he would be light in the bridle. He'd wait beautifully down to the first jump. This horse's rider had light hands, but didn't always like to spend time on the repetition training. For this horse, those fifty transitions were the winning difference. Without the downward transitions, that horse dragged his rider down to the first

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jump and her elbows would be locked long before they ever got there. The first jump would be a disaster and, if they got around the rest of the course, it would be ugly."

Thinking & Listening

"Dressage horses and jumpers need to learn to think in the ring. A horse who is pulling me around the ring is not a horse who is listening to me."

"When I train a jumper, I teach him to anticipate slowing down at the end of the ring. At home I practice jumping into a line, then halting. Or circling. Or trotting the second fence. This horse learns through repetition that his job is to wait for communication. I rarely go fast, turn the way the horse anticipates, or speed around a whole course. In the show ring, then, I'd have a horse who was listening to me."

"It's no different for dressage horses. For a Fourth Level test, my horse might have to canter across the diagonal and do a change at the end of the diagonal. I don't train that lead change. I turn the other way. I might do a Figure Eight in the counter canter until that horse expects to remain on that lead. This will make a responsive horse in the show arena, when I do ask him to do the change at the end of the diagonal."

"Your Training Level horse will have to do a canter/trot transition at a certain letter. Still, you don't have to practice that transition in the test pattern every day. Perform the transition, then circle. Your horse will learn to anticipate the closing of his work space. In the show ring, it's a surprise to the horse when he does his transition and gets to keep going around the ring. He's attentive; he's on the aids."

"The trainer must insert exercises to keep the horse thinking, waiting, improving. The horse is heavy on the left side? The horse stalls out? Train the horse's mind. The rider who goes around the ring with locked arms isn't dealing with the horse's mind."

The Mechanics

"Unfortunately, a huge percentage of the time, horse and rider can go around

the ring locked against each other. To move up, they'll have to develop a higher level of feel. Feel is something that you can enhance; it's a very developable commodity. Feel allows your riding to become more meaningful, and more enriched."

"The first time you attempt a new test at a new level, it's mind over matter. You are thinking, 'Just get it done!' That's understandable. But you want to refine your skill set, develop yourself more at that level. Just getting in and out of the ring won't be good enough for long. I put a lot of effort into developing a feel . . . and every time I move up a level, I have to revise my understanding."

"For many people, this is the key to the mechanical problem of unlocking stiff arms. First, understand that your back is divided into three parts: the upper back (shoulder blades on up, plus the arms), the middle back, and the bottom of your back. Most riders over-use the upper back. This is mechanically inefficient; in trying to find more strength, they lock their elbows."

"Think about the half halt from a physics point of view. The rider takes energy from the horse's hind legs, and dams that energy with his middle and lower body. He sends the energy back to the horse's hind end, rather than letting it get to the bit."

"The properly ridden transition also sends energy forward to the bridle and back to the horse's hind end through the use of the rider's middle and lower back. A successful trot/halt transition is *not* an exercise of sheer strength. You close the distance between your hips and hands by bringing your hips forward. Lift your abdominals and pelvis to close the distance between your hips and your hands. You are engaging the middle part of your back and putting your pelvis more underneath you. This puts the horse's pelvis underneath him and engages his hind end. The horse stays longer in his neck. He's more through."

"You are *not* pulling your arm back to close the space between your hand and your body in a backwards fashion. If you clutch, collapse your shoulders, hollow your tummy and tip your pelvis forward, you're trying to stop the horse's front end with your hands."

Making Mistakes & Setting Goals

"Successful people are not afraid to make mistakes. Hunter riders, you miss a distance or a lead change, and you think it's all over. We have more opportunity to grade ourselves in dressage. Every movement is graded on a scale of one to ten. Watch a video of the Olympic winners . . . each of the top 10 riders made a mistake somewhere! But how brilliant were all the other movements? Learn from them: make a mistake, let it go, and move on."

"Every year, I set realistic goals and 'stretch' goals for me and Coolio. Having moved to Grand Prix, I'll try to develop myself into a competitive international rider."

"My new focus is on taking my Grand Prix to the next level. There's just getting it done . . . then there is learning how to tune it up. There is adding expression and highlighting the horse more," Tim reveals, knowing that it takes courage to reveal your goals to others. "My keywords for 2008 are 'focus,' 'feel,' 'freedom,' and 'for the horse.'"

"Focus: I want to increase my skill set. Riding is communication, and any rider's communication skills can improve. I want to learn to stay more mentally connected to the horse."

"Feel: I want to become more of a trainer than a rider this year, with respect to the horse. I want to develop my feel for how I'm changing my horse."

"Freedom: Freedom to learn, to make a mistake, to grow. Freedom not to doubt myself. I want a wider vision than the tunnel vision that gets you into the next class. I want the freedom to remember that I love this sport."

"For the horse: The horse should enjoy this work. He should look forward to his workouts. I want Coolio to be more than my daily vehicle. He should be glad he's heading into the show ring."

"That said, I would love a chance to represent our country at the World Cup, Olympics or World Equestrian Games some year," Tim concludes. "Dressage has become a passion for me. Every time I move up, I find there's more to learn. There's always a new depth and a new intricacy to this sport . . . and I love it more every day!" ■