

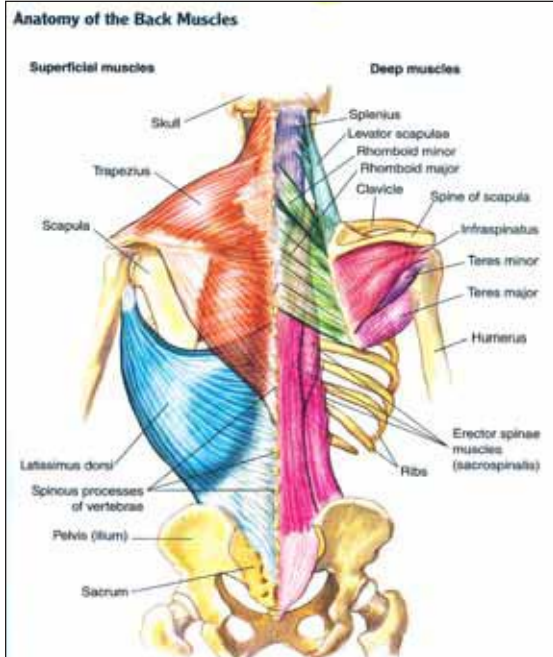


Squaring *Round Shoulders*

Practical suggestions for correcting a common postural problem in athletes

BY KIM GOSS

About 10 years ago I attended a weeklong seminar on evaluating and correcting posture. One of the interesting “tools” we were shown for correcting round-shouldered posture was a harness that strapped across the torso and had an electronic device positioned between the shoulder blades. Every time the wearer slumped forward, the device would generate a mild electric shock. It was an interesting, if drastic, concept (and, I confess, hilarious to watch), but we can permanently correct round shoulders without resorting to



electrocution.

When we talk about round shoulders, we're referring to a posture characterized by an exaggerated curvature of the upper portion of the spine and excessive forward positioning of the shoulders (and often the head). Those who spend a lot of time at computers are likely to display this condition, as are tall individuals (perhaps because they are always looking down on everybody else). Swimmers, wrestlers and gymnasts often display this type of posture, while Olympic weightlifters and divers are among those athletes least likely to display this condition.

Because rounded shoulders are becoming increasingly common (as we

spend more and more time in front of computers and as our lifestyles become increasingly sedentary), I decided to see what could be done about it. I sought out the advice of the best postural correction coach I know, Canadian strength coach and posturologist Paul Gagné.

Gagné has been giving seminars for the past decade on how to correct posture, and his success in this area has attracted numerous professional athletes. His clients include golfers Michelle Wie, Michael Campbell, Justin Rose, and Charles Howell III,

along with more than 50 NHL and 20 CFL players. In December he plans to open a massive sports training facility for elite athletes and high-profile clients in Montreal, Quebec.

From an athletic standpoint, says Gagné, playing a sport without appropriate strength training often causes muscle imbalances that contribute to round shoulder posture. In addition, athletes whose workouts focus on the bench press at the expense of other muscle groups are susceptible to having round shoulders due to the overdevelopment of the pectorals and the anterior (front) deltoids, muscle groups that can pull the shoulders forward. Further,

sports that focus on development of the upper back muscle called the latissimus dorsi (lats) also contribute to this condition because one of the primary functions of the lats is to internally rotate the upper arm bones.

"Round shoulders are especially common in competitive swimmers



Examples of traditional isolation exercises to help round shoulders.

and gymnasts because they start their sports very young and develop strong lats from their sport-specific training," says Gagné. "Further, because young athletes are commonly not involved in strength training programs at a young age and therefore do not have the benefit of exercises that could correct muscle imbalances, their postural problems often become extreme and harder to correct later in life."

From an injury standpoint, says Gagné, round shoulders cause the upper back muscles known as the infraspinatus and teres minor and major to be stretched, internally rotated and under continual tension. The more rounding, the more tension. This unnatural condition makes the shoulders more susceptible to injuries. Further, because flexibility is reduced in round shoulders, the shoulder joint is more susceptible to dislocations. "Impaired flexibility leads to problems with overuse injuries among baseball pitchers and could be related to shoulder impingement syndromes in swimmers," says Gagné.

"Structure dictates function, so if your structure is changed because of



Gymnasts often develop round shoulders from performing rope climbing exercises at a young age.



After just five workouts, 14-year-old gymnast Chloe Van Tussenbroek showed excellent form in the snatch, a great compound exercise that helps prevent round shoulders.



overuse of certain movements, your function is going to be changed,” says Gagné. “That’s why one of my primary goals in training athletes is to get them back into a normal posture so their bodies can function most efficiently without modifying the structure. One problem with sports such as figure skating and gymnastics is that the athletes often develop unnatural postures that, over time, develop into overuse injuries and other problems that can cut short their athletic careers and cause arthritis and chronic pain in later life.”

The Hips Need to Be Square

Now that we’ve reviewed how individuals develop round shoulders and why this is an important issue to address, especially for athletes, let’s look at how to get the shoulders back, as they say, to square one.

Although this article specifically addresses round shoulders, Gagné believes that you can’t adequately address the condition without looking at the posture of the entire body. For our purposes, that means beginning from the bottom up, addressing the feet first. “Those who have round shoulders often

have problems with the feet as well, especially with valgus [flat] feet, which shift the body forward,” says Gagné. “The result is that the muscles of the upper body are always under excessive tension, fighting gravity. Such tension makes it even more difficult to stretch and strengthen the upper body muscles that contribute to round shoulders.” To combat this forward lean, an individual can use orthotics or, as, Gagné refers to them, postural insoles.

Once the body is shifted to a more upright posture – a posture Gagné calls the criterion of normality – the next step is to select the appropriate corrective exercises. Essentially, this means stretching the muscles that are tight and strengthening the muscles that are weak.

“Among the most important muscles to stretch to correct round shoulders are the pectorals, as tightness in these muscles will contribute to pull-

ing the shoulders forward,” says Gagné.

“There are many ways to accomplish this, such as the traditional static stretches used in most health club exercise classes, partner-assisted stretches, and PNF stretches that use resistance.” However, Gagné prefers to use a more aggressive type of stretching called myofascial stretching, which involves prolonged muscular contractions and which stretches not just the muscles but also the fascia, which is the covering around and between the muscles. “It’s not that you cannot achieve the desired results with traditional methods of stretching, but I’ve found that myofascial stretching to be a much faster and more effective way to achieve the results.”

Another area to focus on when stretching, says Gagné, is the upper (thoracic) spine, as excessive curvature in this area encourages round shoulders. “Even with the foot correction, there may be chronic tension in the middle of the back that will affect your ability to correct round shoulders,” says Gagné. “And in some cases it may even be necessary to



get some soft tissue work [such as Active Release Techniques®] on this area to break up adhesions and scar tissue that prevent postural corrections from being achieved.” However, from a stretching perspective, Gagné recommends myofascial stretches and also likes foam rollers for reversing this curvature. Gagné also uses several dynamic stretches, such as overhead squats and various types of military presses from a squat position. “In addition to stretching the middle back, these dynamic exercises give you awareness of the degree of tension that might be present in your lower back.”

For the rotator cuff muscles, especially those involved in external (backward) rotation of the shoulder (such as the infraspinatus and teres minor), Gagné says that many dumbbell and cable exercises are effective in this area. “But for the most ‘bang for your buck,’ you can’t beat snatches,” he says. “Seldom do you see Olympic lifters with rounded shoulders, and one reason is that snatches effectively develop not only



Paul Gagné instructing Chloe on a myofascial stretch for the pectorals.

the external rotators of the shoulders but also the mid-back muscles that pull the shoulder blades back.”

Specifically for the mid-back, Gagné has a few special exercises that focus on muscles that are key in bringing the shoulders back, such as the rhomboids and lower trapezius, which are located on the upper area of the back. “Because these exercises train postural muscles, often my athletes will do 150 to 200 reps a day in sets of 50.”

Neck strength is also an issue, as most people with round shoulders also have forward head postures. A four-way neck machine offers several safe,



Another myofascial stretch, this one for the mid-back region.

key exercises to work the major neck muscles. A primary exercise is neck flexion (forward bending), but Gagné prefers that you perform all the major neck exercises, as the neck is often weak in several planes of motion.

If you want to become an expert in correcting round shoulders, you’ll need more information and training than this article can provide. Seek out the help of a physical therapist, chiropractor or posturologist to help you or your athletes with postural problems. But – and I’m being straight with you – the information here will give you a good head start. **BRS**



Presses from a full squat position, such as the two variations shown here, are great dynamic stretching exercises. These were stretches helped resolve Chloe’s round-shouldered posture.



Strength Coach Charles Poliquin performing an Active Release treatment to break up adhesions in the upper back that can prevent postural corrections.

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