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**Cure Tight Shoulders Anywhere**  
**By Sean Schniederjan**

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## Reshaping Your Shoulders with Arm Bars

An arm bar is a move in wrestling where your opponent brings your arm behind you. If it is moved back far enough, it causes sharp, debilitating pain. So why are so many corrective exercise specialists advising the use of an exercise called an “arm bar” to address shoulder problems?

A cursory glance at the opinions of functional training experts<sup>123</sup> on the subject of arm bars reveals a many-faceted shoulder corrective exercise. They focus on different benefits of the exercise, all of them good for a majority of the population, i.e. those with compromised upper body movement and posture dysfunction. One says the arm bar opens the anterior part of the shoulder (not to mention the bicep downstream). One says the demand of rotary stability, which means the shoulder’s ability to bear pressure (weight) while in a rotated position. One commented on the exercise’s ability to open up the thoracic spine while demanding a “stable shoulder complex” (i.e. the different parts of the shoulder working as a unified whole to provide stability against load) on the working shoulder *at the same time*. Some even say that the arm bar opens the hip flexor on the opposite side. I’m skeptical of that one. The rest you can’t argue with.

The arm bar can best be described as a postural corrective exercise for the thoracic spine and shoulder. What happens with bad posture? The upper spine becomes kyphotic, which means the thoracic spine “lives in flexion,” i.e. slouches forward. It can no longer extend. The shoulders follow suit and get pulled forward - the anterior muscles in the shoulder shorten. The muscles controlling the scapula get long and lose their natural stabilizing function in the shoulder.

It is no wonder all of these experts agree it is an underrated exercise. This one exercise fixes at least three root causes of postural problems in the upper body all at once. These experts are not talking about just any old arm bar, they are talking about the kettlebell arm bar, which is how many people are introduced to arm bar exercise, myself included. It is by far the most popular.

When I produced a strength and mobility seminar in 2012 with Pavel Tsatsouline, author of several books on flexibility and joint mobility, he taught something he had never taught before: his own personal mobility/flexibility routine. It was almost entirely hip flexibility exercises. Afterwards he took questions. Someone from the gallery asked “what about shoulders?” Pavel replied “Do arm bars.”

The purpose of this section is to show you the power of the simple arm bar exercise. We will start with the kettlebell arm bar since that is what is praised by the experts. It isn’t just praised by the experts; there is a litany of testimonials from users who claim the arm bar helped their shoulder woes by regaining stability in the shoulder and opening up tight thoracic spines. You could easily substitute a dumbbell for a kettlebell. We use the

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<sup>1</sup> <http://robertsontrainingsystems.com/blog/the-kettlebell-armbar/>

<sup>2</sup> <http://charlieweingroff.com/2011/08/the-kettlebell-armbar/>

<sup>3</sup> <http://drnotley.com/exercise-of-the-week-kettlebell-armbar/>

kettlebell arm bar as a stepping stone to better understand how to set up the Anywhere Arm Bar.

## **Quick Preliminary Lesson: How to Feel and Use the Lat**

If you are a frequent user of my material, you can skip this section because you already know it. A few times in the sections below you will be asked to press with the lat or engage the lat, so it is important that you are familiar with it.

Push your shoulders down “away from your ears.” Feel the muscle under your armpit contract.



**1 Push your shoulders away from your ears and feel the muscles under your arm pits contract**

Now do it against resistance on any sturdy parallel surface. Remember to push down hard to initiate the lat contraction: "push your shoulders away from your ears."



**2 Do the same against resistance - the suspended weight of your body as in the L-Sit exercise**  
That big slab of muscle below the arm pit is your latissimus dorsi. When you push or pull weights, you want to use that big slab of muscle instead of the smaller muscles in the front of your shoulder. You want your shoulders “down” and not “up.”

Now that you can feel your lat and know how to keep your shoulder down and away from your ear, we move to the arm bars.

## The Kettlebell Arm Bar

The kettlebell arm is fairly straight forward. Use the lightest size weight you have and if you don't feel comfortable doing the kettlebell arm bar, have a partner stand with cupped hands under the weight in the event you might drop it or need to abort. Or better yet, wait until we get to the Anywhere Arm Bar. Move slowly and under control. When you get the end range of your mobility: stop. It should go without saying that if you feel pain, then stop.

First, press the kettlebell as in a floor press to full elbow extension (use your lat, the muscle under your arm pit, to press)



**1 An easy floor press**

Put your non pressing arm overhead



**2 Bring the non pressing arm overhead**

And down against the floor.



**3 bring the non pressing arm flat against the floor**

Now we look at the hips. Picture it like this: the hip on the side not holding the weight remains stationary. The hip on the side holding the weight “flips around” the stationary hip. By “flips around,” I mean that you begin with the back of your hips touching the ground and you end with the front of your hips touching the ground. Put even more simply, just roll over.

Keep the elbow locked.



**4 Begin to turn the weight-holding-side hip over while keeping the bell stable**

Continue to move the hip on the side of your pressing arm over until it touches or comes close to touching the floor.



**5 Continue to press front of press side hip "against the ground" while keeping the bell stable**  
Move the working arm as far back behind as possible and hold it there for 10-15 seconds. You should feel stabilizing muscles in your shoulders firing to maintain the position. It will likely feel pretty good because if you are like most people, you have not done this or anything like it in a really long time.

Your shoulder has no choice but to open. Your thoracic spine has no choice but to extend. Your rotary stabilizers have no choice but to stabilize.

## **Why I Stopped Doing Kettlebell Arm Bars**

This is one of, if not the most effective shoulder corrective exercises. So why would anyone who understands this and has kettlebells or dumbbells stop doing them?

Two words: lazy and busy. Knowing full well that this exercise would do wonders for my upper body comfort and mobility and even performance, I could not bring myself to set aside time to go do them. If I have a few minutes for exercise, I want to lift something heavy or get my heart pounding. If it means a little extra discomfort in my shoulders, then so be it.

The Anywhere Arm Bar has put an end to these pathetic excuses.

It hit me one day: we can do this exercise against a wall. I thought I invented it, but the next day on a forum someone was talking about how his PT had him doing them and how great they were for his shoulders. No one else on the forum seemed to be as excited about what this exercise means as I did. This exercise gives you all the benefits of the kettlebell arm bar with several additional benefits, such as:

- You don't have to worry about fetching or dropping the weight
- You have more control to move yourself in and out your own proper range of motion
- No need for a partner (for beginners)
- You can do it at the office or work or after doing some dishes – freedom is a beautiful thing.

### **Anywhere Arm Bar**

Find a sturdy, open wall.

Put the palm of your abducted arm (brought up and to the side anywhere from rib to shoulder level...play with the range of motion) against the wall, keeping your shoulder down away from your ear.



**1 You might already feel a slight stretch. Push into the wall.**

Lean against the wall, i.e. put some weight against it.

Now turn your hips away from the wall, continuing to push or “fall back” against the wall, now behind you. You should feel the front of the shoulder stretching or opening and the stabilizing muscles in the shoulder firing. Go as far as you comfortably can in to your own range of motion. Don't go too far, but use this opportunity to expand your range of motion. It will gradually improve with practice.



**2 Turn your torso away from the wall. Respect your own range of motion and work slowly.**

Put more resistance against your shoulder stabilizers by increasing the distance between your feet and the wall while continuing to push against the wall.



**3 Bring your feet further away from the wall to increase the stability demand on the shoulder. Continue to turn yourself away from the wall more deeply.**

## **Part II: Extending the Opposite Arm**

Once you've gotten comfortable and perhaps improved your range of motion with the Anywhere Arm Bar, we enhance it by extending the opposite arm and adding some additional cues to *really* unlock the thoracic spine.

Now start to extend your opposite arm. Extend your thoracic spine, i.e. "proud chest." Fire the lat muscle in the arm that is against the wall. Breathe through your diaphragm and relax. Pinch your shoulder blades together. Hold the position for 10-15 seconds.



**4 Follow cues 1-3 to get into position and then extend the opposite arm, continuing to push against the wall. The opposite arm will not touch the wall.**

There you have it. Arguably the greatest shoulder exercise done anywhere, anytime. Do it every day, even if its 10-15 seconds per side. You will notice a difference in your shoulders and your thoracic spine will regain it's natural ability to move, even to the point of feeling "springy."

## More Shoulder Stability Using a Wall

The shoulder needs stability in several ranges of motion, not just with your arm “behind” you. It needs stability against resistance in front of you, like a pushup or a bench press, stability beside you for a good stiff arm, and overhead for pushing weight overhead.

Another fantastic shoulder exercise with a kettlebell or dumbbell is the turkish get up. It has been a life saver for many bad shoulders<sup>4</sup>.

Just like the arm bar, it gets the oft-neglected shoulder stabilizers firing in a serious way. But instead of bringing your arm behind you and opening up the thoracic spine, you bring the weight in front of your, then beside you, and then overhead, maintaining stability and alignment throughout.

Here's a brief rundown of the different ranges of motion requiring a stable shoulder. Please note, this is not detailed instruction on the turkish get up. You can find that all over the internet. This is to point out the three different shoulder positions in the movement:



**1 Floor press - stability in front**

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<sup>4</sup> <http://journal.crossfit.com/2007/05/the-turkish-getup-part-1-by-je.tpl>



**2 Stability over head and to the side.**



**3 Stability in abduction or to the side**



#### **4 Stability over head**

Again, this is one of the best shoulder exercises you can do. Not only that, it is known for correcting side to side strength imbalances. I took my kettlebell press through the roof training the turkish get up consistently and it helped me score 240 snatches in 10 minutes with a 24kg kettlebell due to well-trained overhead shoulder stability and conditioning. Why on earth would I stop doing something so...wonderful? I moved into a different house and never set up a place where I could move around on the floor with enough overhead space. It reminds me of a Dan John classic: "it worked so well I stopped doing it."

But here is another way to stabilize and mobilize the shoulder, anytime, anywhere to eliminate any excuse for not doing get ups for shoulder health.

#### **Anywhere Wide Range of Motion Shoulder Stability**

This is basically the shoulder part of the turkish get up, using the resistance of a wall instead of a weight.

Standing front press. Push the wall in front of you. Keep the shoulder down and feel the lat engaged.



**1 Stability in front**

Open your stance into loaded abduction:



**2 Side stability**

Now bend at the hips to the bent over lockout overhead position:



### **3 Overhead stability**

Is this as good an exercise as the turkish get up? Of course not. What it does do is make it easier to respect your particular ranges of motion without worrying about a weight over your head. Plus, you can do it without setting aside more than a few seconds from your hectic life.

## **Advanced Arm Bars: Hip Bridge Arm Bar**

OK, so you've been doing your arm bars and your shoulders and thoracic spine are really opening up and you want to take your mobility to the next level. Here's an exercise that does that. It isn't for everyone, so use prudence on whether you should do it or not. What you first want to do is make sure your glutes know how to fire. So get into a bridge



**1 Extend the hips, push your heel through the floor feel the glute contraction**

And extend your hips as far as you can and feel your glutes fire:



**2 Extend hips more, feel glutes more**

Now here is the drill.

Get into a pushup plank position



**1 Hips extend, abs/quads/lats activated**

Now rotate and reach one arm to the sky. In this windmill like position, you want your shoulders to be in or close to a straight line. Retract your shoulders and feel an even line of compression going down into the shoulder and elbow of the arm touching the floor.



**2 Keeping one arm anchored, rotate the other into the air until a straight or approximate straight line is achieved**

Now, continue to rotate, reaching back behind you with the air borne arm. Slide the hip on the side of the loaded arm across and plant that foot on the ground.



**3 Actively pull the upper arm behind you, just like the opposite arm extended Anywhere Arm Bar exercise**

Even up your feet and hands. You've got some serious hip and thoracic extension going on here, with both arms barred with all the benefits that entails.



**4 Find the ground, get stable, and extend**

To get out of the position, bring your hand that had previously been rooted into the air and rotate back around into the plank pushup position.



**5 Bring the opposite arm than before into the air and do the exercise in reverse**



**6 Back to your plank position**

## **“Destabilizing the Wall”**

The kettlebell or dumbbell arm bar has one definite advantage over the wall: the weight floating behind you is not ever stable, thus requiring your shoulder stabilizers to work harder.

Here's a way to “destabilize the wall” to make your stabilizers work a little harder doing the Anywhere Arm Bar. The nice thing about this set up is that you are not affecting the structural integrity of your wall, only producing the effect of instability. Your shoulder can't understand the difference.

It's best to use a stability ball, but since I didn't have one I used is a football. A sideways football was better than a kickball and a soccer ball.



**1 Decreasing the stability of the wall increases the stability demand on the shoulder**



**2 Side stability against unstable surface**



**3 Front stability against unstable surface**

## **The Straight Arm Bar**

This is a nice arm bar variation that forces a straight arm. You can do this against a wall or the floor (pictured).

Reach your bottom arm behind you:



**1 Lay flat on your stomach with your arms beside you (not pictured) and then begin to roll backwards over your arm**

Now bring the upper arm behind you:



**2 Now bring the other arm behind you and pinch your shoulder blades together**

Continue to bring the second arm behind you, with the intention of getting both hands to touch while keeping the upper arm extended. It helps to rotate the upper hip around and behind you.



**3 Bring the upper hip "toward the floor behind you"**

## **How to Get a Springy Thoracic Spine and Open, Mobile Shoulders**

The lumbar spine (lower back) is meant to be stable. Strong abdominal muscles fortify it and prevent it from moving<sup>5</sup>. The thoracic spine, however, is meant to move. It should be able to flex and extend with ease. Almost every one has a locked up thoracic spine. So very few have the fluid thoracic spine we should have.

You now have a tool that opens the thoracic spine/shoulders that you can do even while brushing your teeth. It will never get easier than this. There is no excuse why you shouldn't have the open and mobile upper back and shoulders you were meant to have.

All you have to do is be consistent. **→Every day←** do at least two sets of Anywhere Arm Bars or straight arm bars. Do 10-15 seconds on each side in the morning and do 10-15 seconds each side in the afternoon. You can do them more if you like to, but this is your "program minimum."

In one or two days after your shoulders feel so awesome you can hardly stand it, you are going to be tempted to stop doing them. Keep doing them. The Anywhere Arm Bar is your new daily habit, just as important as brushing your teeth.

It is just like keeping your house clean. You have to do a little every day or it gets messy.

### **Limitations and Injuries**

The Anywhere Arm Bar puts you in the driver seat for how much weight you put on your shoulder and what kind of ranges of motion you employ. If you've recently suffered a shoulder injury, then start small on both resistance and range of motion. Be patient. Don't move into pain. You can do the exact same program, 10-15 seconds on each side twice per day, but lower the resistance and range of motion you use. Be patient and don't move into a range of motion you aren't ready for.

### **What to Not Do**

The main thing you need to look out for is not moving into pain. Pain is the fence. Stay inside the fence. Again, stay within your own comfortable range of motion and resistance level. Progressively and gradually and patiently build your range of motion and resistance level over time. With a lot of people I work with, the results come quickly, many times instantly. Still, it is difficult to make a broad, sweeping promise because of individual history.

### **When Should I do the Straight Arm Bar vs. The Anywhere Arm Bar vs. Destabilized Wall Arm Bar?**

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<sup>5</sup> Effective ab and other anterior chain exercises and progressions are found here:  
<http://www.amazon.com/dp/B00E3I2JAE>

We all like a little variety. You can get the exact same results with the straight arm bar and Anywhere Arm Bar. My advice is to do the one you like, but occasionally mix it up. Maybe once a week slide a stability ball or something similar between your hand and the wall to increase the stability work in the shoulder and for a little variety.

### **When Should I do the Turkish Get Up and Kettlebell/Weighted Arm Bar?**

If you have some extra time, these are fantastic warm up before your kettlebell workout. I have a book giving you detailed kettlebell instruction and workout ideas, found here<sup>6</sup>.

## **Why Not Fix Your Tight Hips Anywhere Too?**

Go here to make it happen: <http://www.amazon.com/Cure-Tight-Hips-Anywhere-Anytime-ebook/dp/B00M4WJGOS>

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<sup>6</sup> <http://www.amazon.com/dp/B00EOB6QPY>