

Excess Tension: Know Your Enemy

by Tom Poore

Imagine someone who aspires to be a world class sprinter. He's lean and athletic—by all appearances likely to excel with proper training. So he's taken on by a good coach. Now imagine this aspiring sprinter has invisible weights strapped to his feet. These weights have been there all his life. He's unaware of them, and since they're invisible, no one else can see them. Throughout his training, he never equals the performance of other sprinters who aren't similarly hampered. His coach tries everything he knows, but our aspiring sprinter never improves enough to become a world class athlete. Eventually both the coach and the aspiring sprinter give up. Neither ever knows the true cause of the failure. The coach never knows because he can't see the weights, nor can he feel what the aspiring sprinter feels. The aspiring sprinter never knows because this excess weight is all he's ever known, and thus feels normal to him. He's unaware that other sprinters aren't similarly encumbered. Bear in mind that the solution is simple: remove the invisible weights. But how would anyone in this scenario hit on the solution? It would take a leap of imagination for anyone to discover the true cause of the failure.

In reality, of course, no guitarist is struggling against invisible weights. But excess tension has the same effect on our playing. And without good training in learning to recognize excess tension, it can go just as unnoticed as invisible weights. You need to minimize excess tension as much as possible. And to minimize it, you must first recognize it. Here are four good ways to increase your sensitivity to tension.

Step 1: While standing, allow your arms to hang loosely. This is a relaxed feeling, good for guitar playing. Now shrug your shoulders as tightly as you can. This is a very tense feeling, bad for guitar playing. Unshrug your shoulders and again allow your arms to hang loosely, back to the relaxed feeling. Now shrug your shoulders slightly less than before—although they're not as tense, this is still a tense feeling, one to be avoided in guitar playing. Then relax again. Now alternately shrug and relax your shoulders, each time shrugging with a little less force, until your last shoulder shrug is barely perceptible. Your goal is to gradually develop your perception of even the slightest hint of tension.

Step 2: Still standing, allow your arms to hang loosely. Now, without shrugging your shoulders, clench your fists and tense your arms as tightly as you can. This is a very tense feeling, bad for guitar playing. Then unclench your fists and again allow your arms to hang loosely, back to the relaxed feeling. As in the previous step, clench your fists and tighten your arms a bit less than before. This is still a tense feeling—one to be avoided in guitar playing. And as in the previous step, alternately clench and unclench, each time clenching with a little less force, until your last clench is barely perceptible. Again, your goal is to gradually develop your perception of even the slightest hint of tension.

Note: These first two kinds of tension can be minimized in good playing, but they can't be entirely eliminated. Some of this tension is inevitable in guitar playing. Nonetheless, it can be minimized if you learn to recognize and control it.

Step 3: Clench your teeth as tightly as you can. (Be sure your tongue is out of the way, and don't break anything.) This is a very tense feeling, bad for guitar playing. Now unclench your teeth, back to a relaxed feeling. As in the previous steps, clench your teeth a bit less than before. This is still a tense feeling—one to be avoided in guitar playing. And as in the previous steps, alternately clench and unclench, each time clenching with a little less force, until your last clench is barely perceptible. Again, your goal is to gradually hone your perception of even the slightest hint of tension.

Step 4: Breathe normally, in a relaxed manner. This is a relaxed feeling, good for guitar playing. Now breathe irregularly, as though you're very nervous or scared. This is a tense feeling, bad for guitar playing. Then breathe normally, back to the relaxed feeling. Now breathe irregularly slightly less than before—although you're not as tense, this is still a tense feeling, one to be avoided in guitar playing. Then go back to normal breathing. As in the previous steps, alternately breathe irregularly and normally, dialing down the irregular breathing until it's barely perceptible. Again, your goal is to gradually develop your perception of even the slightest hint of irregular breathing.

Note: The tension you feel in steps 3 and 4 is absolutely unnecessary in guitar playing. Teeth clenching and irregular breathing serve no useful purpose in playing. They should be minimized as much as possible—ideally, they should be eliminated.

The purpose of these four steps is to refine your sensitivity to excess tension. With this refined perception, you'll be able to hone the ease and efficiency of your technique.