Getting to know the shoulder joint (or How to do push-ups)

by Christa Rypins

Christa Rypins offers the workshop Envisioning the Shoulder: Yoga Meets Franklin Method Imagery at Kripalu's 23rd Annual Yoga Teachers Conference, October 14–17.

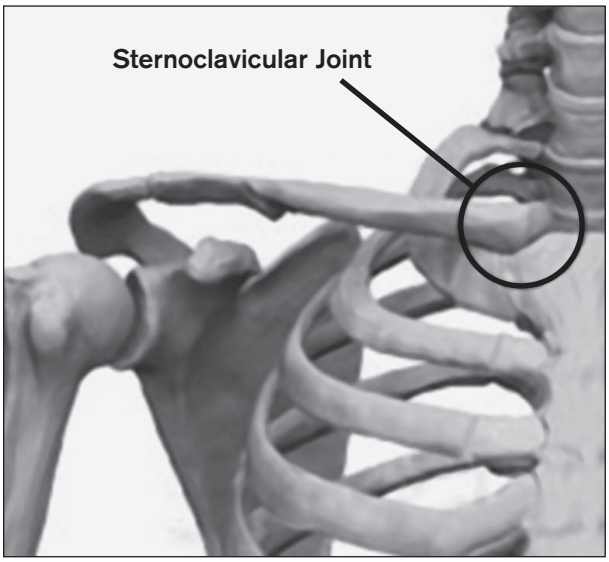
The Franklin Method of Imagery teaches us to picture the bones, muscles, and organs of the body in movement. Understanding this movement increases function and relieves tension. By the end of this article, you will have a picture of weight transfer through the shoulder bones, thus making push-ups more functional, as well as easier. It will also be clear why, as yoga teachers, we must teach our students to traction the elbows away from, rather than into, the ribcage during a push-up.

To start, stand up and get a sense of where your shoulders attach to your torso. There is one joint where the shoulders attach to the torso: the sternoclavicular joint. Everything else is muscle. Touch the right joint with your left hand as you move your right arm, and you'll feel the movement between those bones.

Still standing, soften your knees and jaw, lift your right collarbone, and pinch around it with your left fingers. Lean slightly to the right, and gently swing your right arm. The collarbone is meant to glide on the ribs, but life can tighten that up, so you'll likely find some tender spots. Breathe, relax your jaw, and feel how the collarbone moves as your arm moves. Swing your arm overhead, and bend to the other side, letting your arm rest into your sternoclavicular joint. Look up at your hand and picture it as a flower, with your arm as the stalk and the sternoclavicular joint as the root. To assist the embodiment, drag your left hand from your flowering right hand, down your stalk/arm to the root, the sternal notch. Then lean back to the right, swing the arm, and pinch the collarbone, feeling how the collarbone moves as your arm moves. Repeat this flow at least three times, so you get the sense of your arm both hanging from and supported by the sternoclavicular joint. Now let both arms hang and shake them out.

> Location is the first step toward embodying function and relieving tension.

Next, swing your right arm and walk your left fingers along the top of the collarbone, pinching and pressing where you can. Hang out along the way, massaging and swinging the arm to release any hidden tension you discover. Make your way to where the collarbone attaches to the shoulder blade (acromiocalvicular joint, AC for short), then walk your fingers onto the scapula (shoulder blade), and see if you can find the "spine of the scapula," a horizontal ledge that sticks out. Feel above the scapular spine into the trough that holds the upper trapezius and the supra spinatus, muscles that can get so tight they feel like bones. Notice them soften with your touch. Now feel below the spine onto the body of the scapula. While massaging, you'll sense the muscles and bones moving as you swing your arm.



You can reach the lower section of the shoulder blade from under the arm. Feel how the shoulder blade moves as your arm moves. The scapula is shaped like Africa; find the bottom tip (Cape Hope) and sense how it moves forward and back with your swinging arm.

When you're ready, make your way back to the top of the shoulder blade and onto the top of the arm bone (humerus), feeling around the top (humeral head) as you swing. Notice that when the hand goes back, the humeral head goes forward; when the hand goes forward, the humeral head goes back; when you bring your arm out to the side, the humeral head moves in; and when you bring your arm across your body, the humeral head angles out.

Shake your arms out again and let them hang for a moment. Reach both arms forward and see if the right arm is now longer than the left. Did the embodiment affect your breath, or your neck? Did the benefits make it to your hamstring on that side? Has your balance improved? Location is the first step toward embodying function and relieving tension. Now try it on the left side.

Now that you've woken up to the bones on both sides, stroll around

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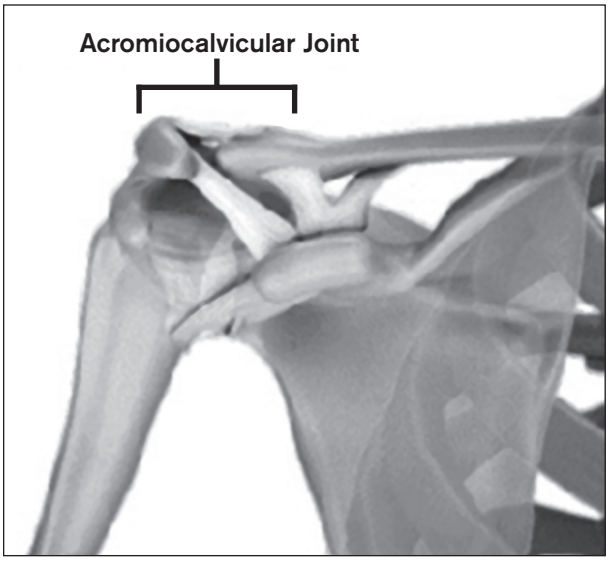

and picture your shoulders hanging and pivoting from your sternoclavicular joint. Now walk and hold your shoulders the way you might habitually hold them. Is there a difference? In my own body, I like the practice of letting the shoulders hang from the sternum. This relaxes my neck and allows my pelvis to move more freely.

Now let's apply our embodiment to push-ups. Start against the wall so that you can experiment with the images without getting stuck in the muscular effort. Spread your fingers out wide, with the heel of your hand in line with the top of your arm bone, just as you would for Plank on the floor. Press through your hands and imagine the connection to the joint where your arms and shoulders meet your torso. Maintain pressure under the ball of the thumb and index finger. Bend and straighten your arms numerous times with the image of the weight supported by the sternoclavicular joint through the whole movement.

With any push-up, it's important to traction the shoulder blades toward the elbows, and traction the head out of the spine. Thus, the serratus anterior engages and the muscles above the shoulders, the upper trapezius, lengthen. Play with different elbow positions, noticing which positions make it easier to keep the weight going through the sternal notch.

The bones and joints of the body strengthen through compression. Where the arm connects into the shoulder—the glenohumeral joint—is a relatively shallow socket the size of a quarter. We want to use arm-weighted movements to support joint compression and bone strength. When the elbows are even slightly away from the torso, the glenohumeral joint gets direct compression. Notice that pulling the elbows into the ribs causes the head of the humerus to traction to the outside of the shoulder socket instead of compressing into the socket. Notice also that, when the elbows are pulled into the ribs, the weight moves away from the sternoclavicular joint into the shoulder blades, requiring more muscular effort.

The beautiful thing about anatomical imagery is that you can apply it to any push-up technique, and picture the weight of the body going through the arms to the sternal notch, thus relieving tension rather than building it. ■

Christa Rypins was a professional ice skating juggler and rhythmic gymnast. While on tour with the Ice Capades at age 21, she injured her shoulder, and she tracks her passion for understanding human function back to this early injury. A Kripalu Yoga teacher trained in Resistance Stretching, Pilates, Somatics, and the Franklin Method of Imagery, Christa leads online trainings for yoga instructors. *www.intelligentbody.net*

Visit www.intelligentbody.net/pushups for more illustrations and a video on getting to know the shoulder. Christa is offering a free online class for everyone who signs in to watch the video before November 30.

Contact Information

Kripalu Yoga Teachers Association (KYTA)
tel: 413.448.3202
website: www.kyta.org
e-mail: kyta@kripalu.org

Kripalu Schools of Yoga and Ayurveda
tel: 800.848.8702
website: www.kripalu.org/yogaandayurveda
e-mail: ksya@kripalu.org

Teaching for Diversity
Sarah Carpenter
tel: 413.448.3371
e-mail: tfd@kripalu.org

Outreach and Membership Coordinator
Amber Wlodyka
tel: 413.448.3461
e-mail: kpa@kripalu.org

KSYA Marketing Coordinator
Julie Balter
tel: 413.448.3257
e-mail: julieb@kripalu.org

Editorial Manager
Tresca Weinstein
tel: 413.448.3332
e-mail: trescaw@kripalu.org

Registration
800.741.7353

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