

A female gymnast is performing a handstand on a blue bar in a gym. She is wearing a black leotard with white accents and white wristbands. Her body is perfectly vertical, and her arms are extended upwards, holding the bar. The background is a blurred gymnasium with a high ceiling and fluorescent lights.

SHOULDER STRENGTH FOR GYMNASTS

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WELCOME

My Shoulder Story

If you're dealing with shoulder issues or wondering if you'll ever get back to bars, you're not alone. I've been where you are.

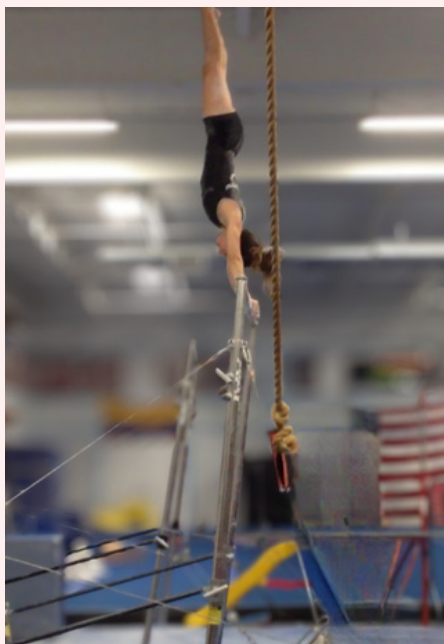
I'm Sarah, a Doctor of Physical Therapy who specializes in working with gymnasts and strength athletes.

Gymnastics was my life for 16 years. Towards the end, my shoulders were in a lot of pain, and because I pushed through it for an entire season, I eventually had to undergo labral repair surgery on both shoulders in 2014 and 2015.

After nearly 2 years of rehab, I was told I probably shouldn't go back to bars.

That was devastating. My favorite event... gone.

For years, I thought that chapter of my life was over.



What Rehab Taught Me

My rehab restored my shoulder motion and gave me enough strength for everyday life - but I still wasn't gymnastics-ready.

I hadn't even attempted a handstand when my insurance stopped covering therapy. Before I was discharged, I was given a basic strength program to continue at the gym so I could keep getting stronger - but I never trained with the intention of returning to bars.

I had accepted the idea that maybe my shoulders just weren't made for bars.

Years later, after becoming a physical therapist, learning more about gymnast-specific rehab, and opening my own practice to do things differently, I finally understood why my shoulders had gotten injured and what they had been missing.

And when I realized that the things that were missing are things I could have controlled, I started to wonder how different things could have been.



What Was Missing in My Gymnastics Career

My shoulders needed more than pain-relief. Simply trying to chase symptoms without the proper underlying foundation will result in a continuous cycle of pain returning.

I needed a foundation that was built to handle gymnastics. That included:

- Movement screening to identify limitations and imbalances BEFORE pain started
- The right mobility for what was causing my shoulder tightness (it's not always the shoulders themselves)
- Rotator cuff and shoulder strength
- Progressive strength training (yes, lifting weights!) to build capacity
- Smarter workload management (not 100 reps until it's perfect)
- Recovery and nutrition in place to support training and healing

When the demands of gymnastics exceed what your shoulders are prepared to handle, your body has to find a way to compensate. That's what happened to me. But... the good news is your body is trainable. You can continue to build your capacity and train smart so you don't exceed that limit.

These principles eventually became the foundation of my own comeback, and how I help other gymnasts come back to the sport.



My Return to Bars

11 years after I hung up my grips, I tried a kip on a pull-up bar and to my surprise, I could do it with ease, as if I didn't miss a day on bars. And, it didn't hurt. That moment lit a fire in me and made me realize I still had it in me. My time on bars might not be done.

Currently, I'm about 1.5 years into my comeback. I have all my skills back on bars (giants, double backs), and I'm even learning new ones (freehip hands and straddle backs are my new fav!).

The comeback wasn't luck. It came from consistently building the right foundation.

Shoulder issues don't automatically mean your gymnastics journey is over.

The body is trainable.

That's why I created this program.



IMPORTANT INFORMATION & DISCLAIMER

This guide is provided for educational and injury risk–reduction purposes only. It is not intended to diagnose, treat, or replace individualized medical care.

If you are currently experiencing pain, have an acute injury, or are recovering from surgery, you should be evaluated by a qualified healthcare provider and receive medical clearance before beginning this or any exercise program.

If you experience pain or any abnormal symptoms while performing any exercise in this guide, discontinue the activity and consult a healthcare professional. Always use your best judgment and seek professional guidance if you are unsure whether an exercise is appropriate for you.

By purchasing and using this guide, you acknowledge that no patient–provider relationship is established between you and Dr. Sarah Barbosa, PT, DPT, or Stronger Performance Physical Therapy LLC. Neither Dr. Sarah Barbosa nor Stronger Performance Physical Therapy LLC shall be held liable for any injuries, losses, or damages that may occur as a result of participating in this program.

Please note that no exercise or training program can completely eliminate the risk of injury. While this program is designed to help reduce injury risk through structured preparation and strength training, individual outcomes may vary based on factors such as training history, workload, recovery, and overall health.

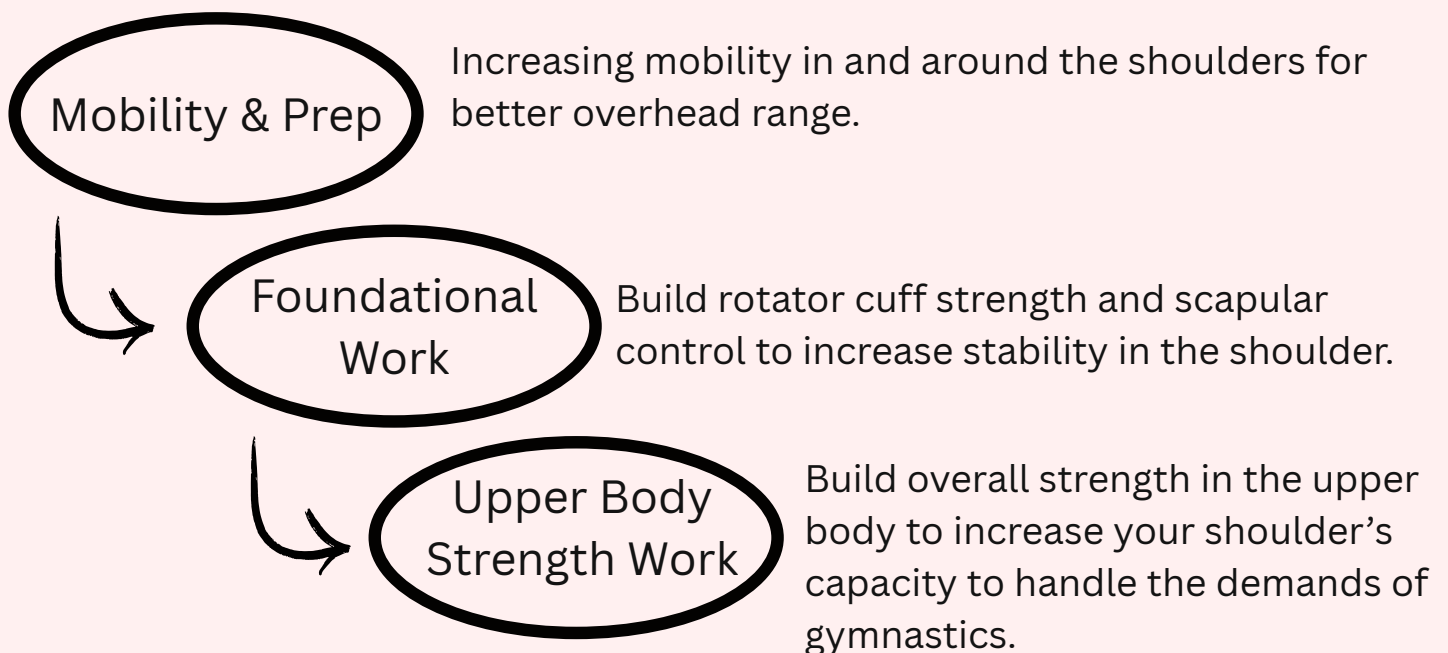
PROGRAM OVERVIEW

This program is designed to help gymnasts build stronger, more resilient shoulders so they can bridge the gap between traditional rehab and being fully prepared for the demands of gymnastics.

You'll build the mobility, strength, control, and capacity needed for skills on bars or other overhead positions.

The program combines mobility work, rotator cuff/stability work, and progressive upper-body strength training.

The program is organized into three main components:



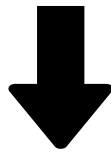
HOW TO USE THIS PROGRAM

This program is designed to fit alongside your existing gymnastics training.

2x/week, you'll complete:

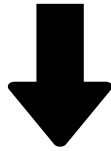
1) MOBILITY & PREP

Prepare your shoulders work on any mobility limitations.



2) FOUNDATIONAL WORK

Build rotator cuff strength, scapular control, and stability.



3) UPPER BODY STRENGTH

Complete Workout A or B, alternating between the two.

If your mobility need some extra attention, repeat the Mobility section on additional days throughout the week.

EQUIPMENT NEEDED

Foam roller • Lacrosse ball • Long resistance bands •
Dumbbells • Pull up bar • Large physio/yoga ball

TRAINING GUIDELINES

CHOOSING THE RIGHT WEIGHT

Choose a weight that makes the target rep range challenging while still allowing you to maintain good form. If you could have kept going for another 3+ reps, the resistance is not enough to make you stronger.

PROGRESS OVER TIME

When you can complete the top of the rep range with good control, increase the weight slightly.

For upper body movements, aim for 2.5-5lb increase.

For lower body movements, aim for 5-10lb increase.

Example: If the goal is 12-15 reps and you can perform 15 with good form, increase the weight next time (and it's okay if you can only get 10-12 reps. Stick with that weight for a while until you can do more reps).

ADJUST WHEN NEEDED

Keep in mind that your strength is affected by many things, like soreness, sleep, recovery, and nutrition. Don't expect there to be progress everyday. Some movements will progress quicker than others. However, if you notice consistent soreness and inability to improve on a lot of exercises, that may be a sign your recovery needs attention. Make sure you're eating healthy, eating enough, and sleeping long enough. Reach out to professionals for help if needed.

SHOULDER BASICS FOR GYMNASTS

Gymnastics asks a LOT from your shoulders. Your shoulders don't just need to be flexible enough to reach the positions your skills require. They also need the strength and control to handle force in those positions.

MOBILITY

Can you get there?

You need enough range of motion to safely reach overhead and other gymnastics positions.

STRENGTH

Can you handle the load?

Strong shoulders - including the rotator cuff - help support your joints and tolerate the demands of gymnastics.

CONTROL

Can you own the position?

Your muscles need to not only produce movement, but resist it too so you can maintain positions overhead.

WHERE THINGS GO WRONG

Problems can arise when there's a mismatch between what your shoulders **can handle** and what gymnastics **demand**s of them.

For example:

- Having the flexibility to reach a position, but not the strength to control it
- Starting to train harder skills without also increasing your strength training work so your strength increases alongside your skills.

Flexibility gets you into the position. Strength + control help you own it.

PERFORMANCE

PHYSICAL THERAPY

STEP 1

MOBILITY



QUICK SHOULDER MOBILITY SCREENS

Before you start, take a few minutes to perform these screens. They can help you identify if mobility is a limiting factor. and if so, what specific areas may need a little extra attention during the Mobility section. You can come back to them to re-test to see your progress.

TEST#1: Overhead mobility - palms up + palms down



How to Perform:

- Sit with your butt, back and head against the wall. Knees bent.
- Raise your arms and try to reach the wall without bending your elbows or arching your low back.

What your results may mean:

- If you can't touch the wall with **palms down**: you might have stiffness in the **thoracic spine** (upper back) or tightness/spasming in the **muscles in the back (posterior) of your shoulders**
- If you can't touch with **palms up**: your **lat muscles** may be contributing to the limitation.

TEST#2: Pec/ External Rotation



How to Perform:

- Sit with your butt, back and head against the wall. Knees bent.
- Bend your elbows and have them touch the wall.
- Rotate your forearms up. See if the backs of your wrists can touch the wall (without bending the wrists)

What your results may mean:

- If you can't touch the wall with your straight wrists, you might have tightness in the **pec (chest) muscle**

TEST#3: Thoracic Rotation



How to Perform:

- Kneel next to a wall. Outside knee up. Arms straight out in front of you, hands together.
- Open one arm as you rotate your chest. See if your arm can touch the wall
- Make sure to check both directions!

What your results may mean:

- If you can't touch the wall, you may either have stiffness or weakness in the **thoracic spine**

WHAT TO DO WITH YOUR RESULTS

Still complete the full Mobility & Prep routine - you may find limitations you didn't expect!

Pay extra attention to exercises that target areas identified in your screens. Look for the areas highlighted in red.

MOBILITY & PREP ROUTINE

Now that you've screened your mobility, let's work on it.

This section is designed to improve the mobility you need for overhead positions.

How to Use:

- Complete before your Foundation + Strength work
- Allow about 10 minutes
- Use your screen results to guide where you spend extra time.

Move through each section in order:

1) Soft Tissue Prep

 [Video Link](#)

- Foam rolling: thoracic spine, lats/back of shoulder
- Trigger point: back of shoulder
- Trigger point: pecs

2) Stretching

 [Video Link](#)

- Stretching: lats, pecs, back of shoulder

3) Active Mobility

 [Video Link](#)

- Thoracic spine mobility:
 - Thoracic extension over roller
 - Open book
 - Kneeling (butt to heels) thoracic rotation
- Scapular Mobility:
 - Quadruped scapular protraction/retraction
 - Prone scapula shrugs with roller
 - Shoulder Superman circuit

If an area feels tight or restricted, spend extra time there.

A woman with her hair in a bun, wearing a grey tank top and black leggings, is standing in a gym. She is holding a resistance band with both hands, pulling it towards her chest. The band is anchored to a metal frame on the left. In the background, there is a framed poster on the wall that says "YOU OWE YOU" and shows a person in a dynamic pose. The gym floor is dark and textured. The overall lighting is dim, with the woman's figure highlighted by a soft light.

STEP 2

SHOULDER FOUNDATIONS

ROTATOR CUFF + SCAPULAR CONTROL

SHOULDER FOUNDATIONS

This section builds the control and stability your shoulders need to handle gymnastics. These muscles often get overlooked with basic upper body programs, but are essential for strong, healthy shoulders.

How to Use:

- Complete after Mobility, before strength
- Move slowly and with control
- Choose resistance that challenges you without sacrificing technique
- You should feel the target muscles working - not joint pain.



Exercises

1) Banded External Rotation

 [Video Link](#)

- 2-3 sets of 12-15 reps

Keep shoulder down/back, elbow tucked in

2) Dumbbell External Rotation (Elbow on Knee)

 [Video Link](#)

- 2-3 sets of 12-15 reps
- Control the lowering phase; don't let the shoulder roll forward

3) Banded Internal Rotation at 90°

 [Video Link](#)

- 2-3 sets of 12-15 reps
- Keep the shoulder down/back and elbow in place

4) Full Can Raise

 [Video Link](#)

- 2-3 sets of 12-15 reps
- Keep chest tall

5) Prone Y

 [Video Link](#)

- 2-3 sets of 12-15 reps
- Fight for that end range

CONTROL FIRST. Once you own the technique, don't be afraid to challenge yourself with resistance. These muscles need to get stronger too.

A woman with her hair in a bun, wearing a black tank top and leggings, is performing a pull-up on a black pull-up bar. She is viewed from behind, showing her back muscles. The bar is part of a larger gym structure with vertical posts. In the background, a mirror reflects the scene, and a sign on the wall reads "FOR GYM ATHLETES".

STEP 3

UPPER BODY STRENGTH

UPPER BODY STRENGTH

This program is divided into 2 phases. You'll complete Phase 1 for 6-8 weeks, then move onto phase 2:

- **Phase 1:** Build foundational strength & control
- **Phase 2:** Progress into bar-specific and unilateral strength

Each phase should be followed for at least **6-8 weeks**.

Perform strength workouts **2x/week**, alternating between Workout A & B

- Example:
 - Week 1: A / B
 - Week 2: A / B

Rest about **60-90 seconds** between sets, or when you feel ready for the next set.

Move to phase 2 when:

- Exercises feel controlled
- You have no pain during training
- You can complete all reps with good form

YOUR PROGRAM TRACKER

Use the tracker to follow your workouts, record weights and reps, and track your progress throughout the program.

→ OPEN YOUR PROGRAM TRACKER



Click there

Phase 1 - Workout A								
EXERCISE	SETS/REPS	VIDEO	WEIGHTS / REPS / PROGRESS					
			Week 1	Week 2	Week 3	Week 4	Week 5	Week 6
Banded Rows	3x15	Link						
Banded Lat Pull Down	3x15	Link						
Pushups	3x12-15	Link						
Inverted Shrugs	3x10-12	Link						
Scap Pull-Ups	3x10-12	Link						
Dead Bugs	2x10	Link						
Overhead Weighted Crunches	2x12-15	Link						

In order to edit your own version, once you open the Spreadsheet, click File > Make a Copy

HOW THE PROGRAM PROGRESSES

PHASE 1 - BUILD YOUR FOUNDATION

6-8+ weeks

Build foundational upper-body strength and control

PHASE 2 - GYMNASTICS-SPECIFIC STRENGTH

6-8+ weeks

Progress to heavier, more challenging and gymnastics-specific strength work.

Move to Phase 2 when:

- ✓ Exercises feel controlled
- ✓ You're training without pain
- ✓ You can complete all reps with good form

PHASE 1: BUILD YOUR FOUNDATION

- Tap each exercise name to view the exercise demo
- Follow this phase for **6-8 weeks** before progressing to Phase 2

WORKOUT A

PULL

- Banded Rows - 3x15
- Banded Lat Pull downs - 3x15

PUSH

- Pushups - 3x12-15

SHOULDER/SCAP

- Inverted shrugs (feet elevated or belly to wall handstand)- 3x10-12
- Scap Pull-ups - 3x10-12

CORE

- Dead Bugs - 2x10
- Overhead Weighted Crunch - 2x12-15

WORKOUT B

PULL

- High Row to Chest - 3x12-15
- Straight Arm Banded Lat Pullover - 3x12-15

PUSH

- Dumbbell Overhead Press - 3x10-12

SHOULDER

- Front Raises - 3x12-15
- Prone T - 3x10-12

CORE

- Banded Bear Crawls -2-3 rounds ~5 steps with each arm (forward/back, side/side)

PHASE 2: GYMNASTICS-SPECIFIC STRENGTH

•Only begin this phase after completing Phase 1 for at least 6-8 weeks

•Tap each exercise name to view the exercise demo

WORKOUT A

PULL

- Single Arm Dumbbell Row - 4x8-10
- Dumbbell Lat Pullover - 3x12-15

PUSH

- 1/2 Kneeling Dumbbell Overhead Press - 3x10-12

SHOULDER/SCAP

- Front Raises (control on way down, faster on way up) - 3x8-10

CORE

- 1/2 Turkish Get Up - 2x10-12

WORKOUT B

PULL

- Pull-Up (Assisted if needed): 3x6-8
- Dumbbell Lat Pullover - 3x8-10

PUSH

- Tempo Pushups (slow on way down, fast on way up): 3x10-12

SHOULDER

- Overhead Carry - 3 rounds x ~30 seconds per arm

CORE

- Ball Roll Outs- 3x8-12

A gymnast in a purple leotard is performing a handstand on a pommel horse. The background features three large flags: the Saudi Arabian flag (green with white Arabic calligraphy and a sword), the European Union flag (blue with yellow stars), and the Japanese flag (white with a red circle). The scene is dimly lit, with the gymnast and the flags being the primary light sources.

YOU DID IT!

THE PROGRAM ENDS HERE.
YOUR PROGRESS DOESN'T.

Amazing job completing the program!

You've put in the work - but building stronger, healthier shoulders doesn't stop here.

What To Do Next

→ Repeat Phase 1

If you still feel like you're building control, stability, or confidence

→ Continue with Phase 2

If the exercises feel solid and controlled, continue progressing your weights and difficulty over time.

Strength is built through consistency. Keep progressing, keep listening to your body, and keep building your capacity over time. This program is yours to keep doing as long as you'd like!

BEFORE YOU GO...

Take a moment to think about where you started and what's changed.

- Do your shoulders feel stronger or more stable?
- Do skills feel more controlled or confident?
- Are you more aware of how you're moving?
- Has anything that used to bother you improved?

I'D LOVE TO HEAR FROM YOU.

Your feedback helps me continue improving these programs - and helps other gymnasts feel more confident getting started.

SHARE YOUR EXPERIENCE [HERE](#).

WANT MORE SUPPORT?

if this program helped you build stronger shoulders but you want a plan tailored specifically to you, I also work with gymnasts 1:1.

1:1 performance coaching can help you:

- Build strength for your specific skills and goals
- Identify areas that may be limiting your performance
- Progress your training with more individualized guidance.

Questions or interested in working together?

Email me at: Sarah@StrongerPerformancePT.com

More gymnastics strength & training:

Instagram: [@BuildingStrongerGymnasts](https://www.instagram.com/BuildingStrongerGymnasts)

From one gymnast to another...

You're capable of more than you think - sometimes you just need the right plan and the right guidance.

-Dr. Sarah

