

Barres: How to Collapse or Lean the First Finger to Move Smoothly to or from a Barre, Part 1 of 2

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Benefit #1: The ability to alternately collapse and bend the tip joint of the 1st finger smooths out chord changes.

One of the most common chord changes that beginning folk and pop guitar players struggle with is going from a C-major chord to what I call a "baby" F-major chord. The F-major chord requires a two-string barre. This chord change and variations of it occur in countless classical guitar pieces as well. Example #1:

Example 1.

C major and F major chords

The example shows five fretboard diagrams for C and F major chords. Above each diagram is a chord symbol (C or F) and a fingering sequence. Below the diagrams is a musical staff in 4/8 time with a treble clef and a key signature of one sharp (F#). The staff contains five measures, each with a whole chord. Below the staff is a table of fret numbers for the strings (T, A, B).

	Measure 1 (C)	Measure 2 (F)	Measure 3 (C)	Measure 4 (F)	Measure 5 (C)
T	0	1	0	1	0
A	1	1	1	1	1
B	0	2	0	2	0
B	2	3	2	3	2
B	3	3	3	3	3

Here is the smoothest and best way to do this chord change:

1. Play the C-major chord
2. Hyperextend the tip joint of the first finger. That means to collapse or allow the tip joint to bend backward.
3. Allow the collapsed tip joint to fall across the first two strings to form the 2-string barre for the F-major chord.

Here is the C-major chord with the tip joint of the first finger in its normal bent position.



Bent fingertip:



Here is the F-major chord with the tip joint of the first finger hyperextended (collapsed).



Hyperextended fingertip:



Some guitarists do this movement quite naturally, but many cannot do it at all. I even see some advanced players do it wrong.

Wrong:

Some players lift the tip of the first finger entirely off the 2nd string of the C chord and then set it back down to play the barre in the F chord.

Why it's wrong:

1. It will sound choppy. Lifting the 1st finger will leave a gap between the two chords, especially from the F chord to the C chord.
2. The first finger is an anchor finger. Anchor fingers stabilize the hand and provide a reference point for the other fingers. Lifting an anchor finger, especially to change to a barre chord, removes the reference point, often resulting in the other fingers landing on the wrong strings.

Not Optimal:

Some players keep the first finger on the 2nd string but then straighten the tip joint to place a *flat barre* across the first two strings of the F chord.



Why it's not optimal:

Holding the tip joint straight requires the guitarist to change their hand position to hold both strings tightly. Changing the hand position invites finger misplacement and accidental damping of strings held by other fingers.

Also, as Charles Duncan points out in [The Art of Classical Guitar Playing](#) (the classic book in the field of guitar pedagogy), *hyperextending or collapsing the tip joint* of the first finger to hold a two or three-string barre is far more mechanically efficient (that means easier!) than keeping the finger flat or straight.

IMPORTANT NOTE FOR THOSE WHOSE TIP JOINTS WILL NOT COLLAPSE

Even though collapsing or hyperextending the tip joint is the ideal way to execute this technique, you can do it by leaning the finger over into a flat barre. It is not as mechanically efficient or stable, but you can still reap the benefit of making smoother chord changes. Your changes will sound better than if you lift the 1st finger entirely and reposition it to make a barre.

Watch me demonstrate how to execute this common chord change in Video #1.

Video #1-How to Change from a Simple C Chord to an F Chord



Genetics and other factors beyond your control

Unfortunately, due to genetic factors, arthritis, calcification, or previous injuries, some people have little mobility in the tip joint. They will be unable to hyperextend (collapse) the joint.

But aside from genetics and medical factors, with a lot of practice, a player of any age may be able to improve the flexibility in the joint of the 1st finger.

Here is the Practice Strategy to Learn the Technique

Again, some players are able to use this technique quite naturally. But others whose joints are not pliable might have difficulty. But that's okay. Even if your tip joint does not hyperextend (collapse), you can still use this technique. And with some determined practice, you may develop some flexibility in the joint.

Watch me demonstrate practice strategies to learn this valuable skill and develop flexibility in the tip joint in Video #2.

Video #2, How to Do It



Benefit #2: The ability to alternately collapse and bend the tip joint of the 1st finger smooths out chord changes. PLUS, it can serve as an ANCHOR FINGER.

In the *Caprice in D minor* by Matteo Carcassi, we see the familiar C to F chord change. The 1st finger starts in its standard bent configuration for the C chord. To change to the F chord, it collapses into a 2-string barre to provide a smooth chord change. An added benefit is that it serves as an anchor finger between the two chords. Example #2:

Example 2.

Caprice in D minor (Matteo Carcassi)
measures 6-7

Collapse the tip joint of the first finger so that it falls across the 1st and 2nd strings to form a 2-string barre.

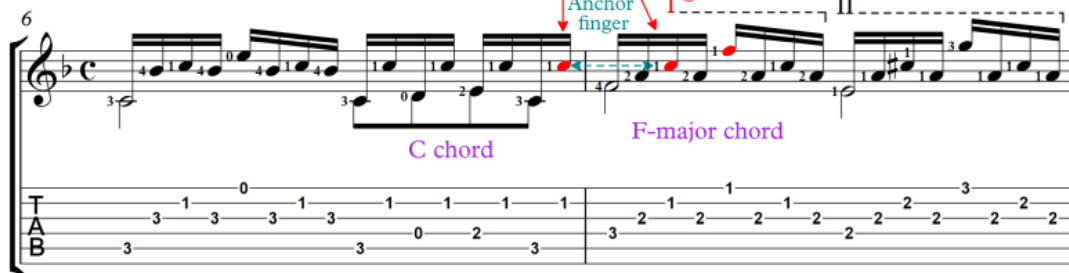
Anchor finger

I ②

II

C chord

F-major chord



Watch me demonstrate how to use this technique in Carcassi's *Caprice* in Video #3.

Video #3 Caprice by Matteo Carcassi



Here in *Pavana No. 3* by Luis Milán, we have several chord changes from C major to F major. We keep the 1st finger bent to play the C chords and collapse it to change smoothly into the F chords. The finger serves double duty as an anchor finger as we keep the tip firmly on the 2nd string as we bend it and collapse it to switch back and forth between the chords. Example #3:

Example 3.

Pavana No. 3 (Luis Milan)
measures 62-69

62

C F C C F C

Fingertip joint bent Fingertip joint collapses Fingertip joint bent Fingertip joint collapses Fingertip joint bent

The tip of the 1st finger stays firmly on the 2nd string to serve as an anchor finger.

T	0	3	1	3	0	3	1	3	0	1	0	0	0
A	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	3	0	0
B	0	0	2	0	0	0	2	0	0	2	0	0	0
	3	2	3	2	3	2	3	2	3	2	0	3	3

Watch me demonstrate how to play this section of the *Pavana No. 3* in Video #4.

Video #4 Milan Pavane No. 3, m62-69



Or, in *Sounds of the Bells* by João Pernambuco, we have the 1st finger collapsing into a 2-string barre for the G-major barre chord, also providing us with a valuable anchor finger. Example #4:

Example 4.

Sounds of the Bells (João Pernambuco)
measures 32-33

(The 6th string is tuned to D)

Smooth chord change

Fingertip joint collapses

Fingertip joint bent

III^②

Anchor finger

G-major chord

If we do not use the tip of the 1st finger as an anchor, the fingers have no connection or reference to the fretboard. The chord change becomes very precarious.

Watch me demonstrate this passage from *Sounds of the Bells* in Video #5.

Video #5 Sounds of the Bells, m32-33



BENEFIT #3: The ability to alternately collapse and bend the tip joint of the 1st finger smooths out chord changes. PLUS, it can serve as a GUIDE FINGER.

In the *Valse* by Manuel Ponce, bending/collapsing the tip of the 1st finger enables us to connect the chords smoothly AND provides us with a GUIDE FINGER for stability and confidence.

We begin in measure #3 with the tip joint of the 1st finger collapsed to play the 3-string barre at the 4th fret for the E-major chord. We keep the fingertip firmly on the 3rd string and use it as a guide finger to slide to the G# at the 1st fret. Finally, still holding the fingertip firmly on the 3rd string, we use it as a guide finger to slide it up to the 2nd fret to play the final D-major chord. As we slide, we collapse the finger into a 3-string barre at the 2nd fret to move smoothly into the D chord. Example #5:

Example 5.

Valse (Manuel Ponce)
measures 1-4

(The 6th string is tuned to D)

II ③

IV ③

II ③

E-major chord

D-major chord

TAB

2 5 2 5 4 2 4 4 0 2 3 //

If we do not use the tip of the 1st finger as a guide finger for the shifts, the hand loses its connection with the fretboard leading to choppiness or failure.

Watch me demonstrate the Valse in Video #6.

Video #6 Valse by Manuel Ponce



And here, in *Sounds of the Bells*, is another example of how we can collapse the tip joint of the 1st finger to connect a chord change smoothly and serve as a guide finger, this time for a long shift.

We begin with the 1st finger bent in its standard configuration. We keep the fingertip firmly on the 3rd string and use it as a guide finger to slide up to the D at the 7th fret. As we slide, we collapse the tip joint into a 3-string barre to move smoothly into the final chord.

Example #6:

Example 6.

Sounds of the Bells (João Pernambuco)
measures 15-16

Smooth chord change

Fingertip joint collapses

Fingertip joint bent

Guide finger

VII^③

15 (The 6th string is tuned to D)

Without the guide finger, one will tend to lift the first chord early to have more time to get to the second chord. That will cut the chord short and will not sound very good. By using the guide finger, we can hold the first chord for a full beat plus have the stability and confidence to land the second chord accurately.

Watch me demonstrate the long shift in *Sounds of the Bells* in Video #7.

Video #7 Sounds of the Bells, Long Shift

CLICK TO WATCH THE VIDEO on douglasniedt.com

Video #7 Sounds of the Bells, Long Shift

