

Learn to Collapse Your Left-Hand Tip Joints

By Douglas Niedt

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We are taught early on to always keep our left-hand fingers bent. We train ourselves to keep our fingers bent at the middle joint and the tip joints. In most situations, our fingers are strongest and work most efficiently when the joints are bent. But as with many rules of classical guitar technique, there are times when it is better if we break the rules.

The technique of allowing the tip joint of a left-hand finger to collapse (hyperextend) or straighten (but keeping the middle joint bent) is useful and sometimes essential in three situations:

- 1. Playing certain formations in high positions on the fretboard.**
- 2. Executing pull-offs (descending slurs) or ornaments containing pull-offs.**
- 3. Maintaining proper string spacing on awkward or difficult chords.**

Hyperextension of the tip joints is also employed to play partial bars. But I have already discussed that in my tip [Specialty Bars Part 3: Partial Bars](#).

Genetic Factors

Your ability to collapse (hyperextend) the tip joints of the left-hand fingers is dependent upon some genetic physical traits of your fingers. Some players' fingers will collapse or hyperextend only slightly. That is okay and this technique tip will probably work for you.

Some players' joints will not collapse at all. Unfortunately, if your fingers are in that category, this technique tip will not work for you.

Finally, the middle joint must stay bent while collapsing (hyperextending) the tip joint. If the middle joint collapses when you attempt to collapse the tip joint, this technique tip will not work for you.

Stability in High Positions of the Fretboard

In the following examples of chords in high positions on the fretboard, it is helpful or even essential to allow the tip joint of the first or second finger to collapse in order to play the chord or passage.

In the *Piu mosso* arpeggio section of *Prélude No. 2* by Heitor Villa-Lobos, a chord is held at the 12th, 13th, and 14th frets. Most players will find it impossible to play the chord clearly without allowing the tip joint of the second finger to collapse (Example #1):

Example 1. *Prélude No. 2* (Heitor Villa-Lobos) measure #69-73

The image displays two systems of musical notation for guitar, specifically focusing on the right hand (treble clef) and the fretboard (TAB). The notation is in 2/4 time and D major (two sharps).

System 1 (Measures 69-71):

- Measure 69:** Treble clef has notes G4 (4th fret), A4 (5th fret), B4 (6th fret), and D5 (7th fret). Fingering: 4, 2, 0, 0. TAB: 9, 9, 8, 0, 0, 8, 9.
- Measure 70:** Treble clef has notes G4 (4th fret), A4 (5th fret), B4 (6th fret), and D5 (7th fret). Fingering: 4, 2, 0, 0. TAB: 10, 10, 9, 0, 9, 8, 0.
- Measure 71:** Treble clef has notes G4 (4th fret), A4 (5th fret), B4 (6th fret), and D5 (7th fret). Fingering: 4, 2, 0, 0. TAB: 9, 9, 8, 0.

Annotations for System 1:

- Measure 69: "Tip joint of second finger in normal flexed, bent position." (points to the second finger on the 5th fret).
- Measure 70: "Tip joint of second finger begins to straighten." (points to the second finger on the 5th fret).

System 2 (Measures 72-73):

- Measure 72:** Treble clef has notes G4 (4th fret), A4 (5th fret), B4 (6th fret), and D5 (7th fret). Fingering: 4, 2, 0, 0. TAB: 14, 14, 13, 0, 0, 13, 14. (Note: The 14th fret is marked as the 14th fret).
- Measure 73:** Treble clef has notes G4 (4th fret), A4 (5th fret), B4 (6th fret), and D5 (7th fret). Fingering: 4, 2, 0, 0. TAB: 13, 12, 11, 0, 11, 10, 0.
- Measure 74:** Treble clef has notes G4 (4th fret), A4 (5th fret), B4 (6th fret), and D5 (7th fret). Fingering: 4, 2, 0, 0. TAB: 10, 10, 9, 0, 9, 8, 0.

Annotations for System 2:

- Measure 72: "Collapse the tip joint of the second finger" (red arrow points to the second finger on the 5th fret).
- Measure 73: "Tip joint of second finger begins to straighten." (points to the second finger on the 5th fret).
- Measure 74: "Tip joint of second finger in normal flexed, bent position." (points to the second finger on the 5th fret).

Watch me demonstrate in this blockbuster video (Video #1).

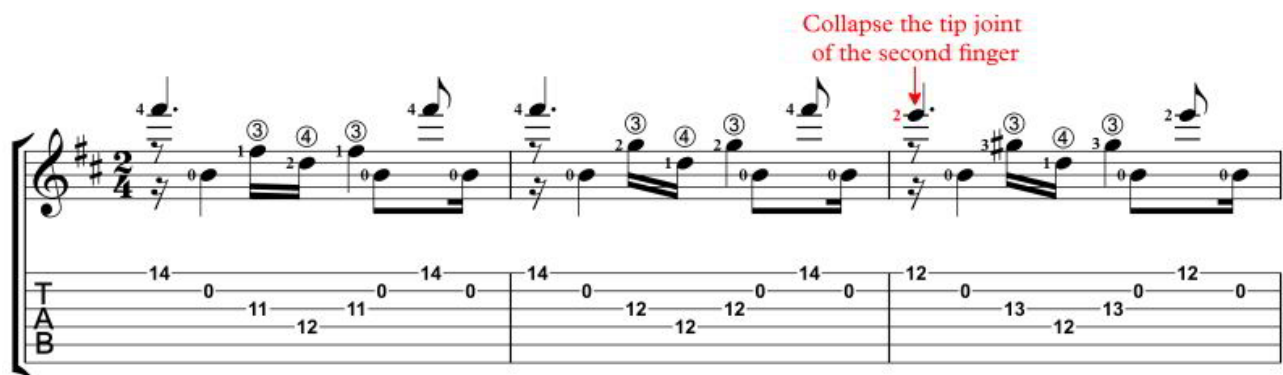
Tech Tip Collapse Left-Hand Tip Joints Video #1: Prelude No. 2 (Villa-Lobos)



Three examples may be found in *La Catedral* by Agustín Barrios Mangoré. In the first movement, the *Preludio "Saudade"*, we have a chord that requires the tip joint of the second finger to straighten or collapse to play it clearly (Example #2):

Example 2. *La Catedral. Preludio "Saudade"* (Agustín Barrios Mangoré) measure #5-7

Collapse the tip joint of the second finger



Watch me demonstrate in this video. I assure you it is more interesting than watching paint dry (Video #2).

Tech Tip Collapse Left-Hand Tip Joints Video #2: Preludio Saudade from La Catedral (Barrios)



In the second movement, *Andante Religioso*, once again the second finger must straighten or collapse to play the chord comfortably and reliably (Example #3):

Example 3. *La Catedral. Andante Religioso* (Agustín Barrios Mangoré) measure #12

Straighten or collapse the tip joint of the second finger.

II

2 14 14 14 12

2 14 13 12

I'll show you (Video #3).

Tech Tip Collapse Left-Hand Tip Joints Video #3: Andante Religioso from La Catedral (Barrios)

CLICK TO WATCH THE VIDEO on douglasniedt.com

Tech Tip Collapse Left-Hand Tip Joints Video #3: Andante Religioso from La Catedral (Barrios)

The final example from *La Catedral* is the difficult ending passage of the third movement (*Allegro Solemne*). I provide three versions of left-hand fingering. In each of them, the tip joint of the first finger must collapse to play the passage successfully (Example #4):

Example 4. *La Catedral. Allegro Solemne* (Agustín Barrios Mangoré) measure #85-end

Richard Stover's fingering

IV-----, VII-----

Tip joint of second finger begins to straighten.

Collapse the tip joint of the second finger

VII IV

David Russell's fingering

Tip joint of second finger begins to straighten.

Collapse the tip joint of the second finger

VII

John Williams' fingering

VII

Tip joint of second finger begins to straighten.

Collapse the tip joint of the second finger

Williams reverses the order of D and F#

VII

IV

This video demonstration will soon be on Netflix (Video #4).

Tech Tip Collapse Left-Hand Tip Joints Video #4: Allegro Solemne from La Catedral (Barrios)



CLICK TO WATCH THE VIDEO on douglasniedt.com

Tech Tip Collapse Left-Hand Tip Joints Video #4: Allegro Solemne from La Catedral (Barrios)

Pull-offs (Descending Slurs) and Ornaments Containing Pull-offs:

Pull-offs (descending slurs) and ornaments containing pull-offs can often be played more successfully and consistently by collapsing the tip joint of a finger.

I often observe students who have trouble playing the opening pull-off of *Capricho Árabe* by Francisco Tárrega (Example #5):

Example 5. *Capricho Árabe* (Francisco Tárrega) measure #2

Collapse the tip joint of the first finger before playing the slur.

They either produce a weak pull-off or in attempting to do a strong pull-off, actually pull the string off the edge of the fretboard. A simple remedy is to collapse the tip joint of the first finger. This stabilizes the string and gives the 4th finger additional leverage to snap strongly off the string without having to worry about the string being pulled off the edge of the fretboard.

Let me show you (Video #5).

Tech Tip Collapse Left-Hand Tip Joints Video #5: 1st Pull-Off in Capricho Arabe (Tarrega)

CLICK TO WATCH THE VIDEO on douglasniedt.com

Tech Tip Collapse Left-Hand Tip Joints Video #5: 1st Pull-Off in Capricho Arabe (Tarrega)

Also in *Capricho Árabe*, is a difficult ornament in the first measure of the F-major section (Example #6):

Example 6. *Capricho Árabe* (Francisco Tárrega) measure #35

III -----

Collapse the tip joint
of the third finger

The musical score for measure #35 of *Capricho Árabe* by Francisco Tárrega is shown. The score is in 4/4 time and F major. It features a treble and bass staff. The treble staff has a melodic line with various ornaments and fingerings. The bass staff has a supporting line with fingerings. A red arrow points to a specific ornament on the treble staff with the text "Collapse the tip joint of the third finger".

This ornament can be played without collapsing the tip joint of the third finger. But for many players, collapsing the tip joint stabilizes the string, keeping it from moving. This enables the player to pull off more firmly with greater control, resulting in a clearer and more predictably successful execution of the ornament.

I've been trying for years for an Academy Award nomination—this may be the one. Watch (Video #6).

Tech Tip Collapse Left-Hand Tip Joints Video #6: F Major Section Ornament Capricho Arabe (Tarrega)



CLICK TO WATCH THE VIDEO on douglasniedt.com

Tech Tip Collapse Left-Hand Tip Joints Video #6: F Major Section Ornament Capricho Arabe (Tarrega)

A difficult ornament appears near the end of Tárrega's well-known *Adelita*. Many players can play the ornament without collapsing any tip joints. But for others, collapsing the tip joint of the second finger may be helpful (Example #7):

Example 7. *Adelita* (Francisco Tárrega) measure #14

Collapse the tip joint
of the second finger



Watch me demonstrate the technique (Video #7).

Tech Tip Collapse Left-Hand Tip Joints Video #7: Ornament in Adelita (Tarrega)



CLICK TO WATCH THE VIDEO on douglasniedt.com

Tech Tip Collapse Left-Hand Tip Joints Video #7: Ornament in Adelita (Tarrega)

String Spacing

Sometimes a chord fingering causes a left-hand finger to pull a string sideways, usually towards the floor. That finger will then damp the adjacent string or cause it to buzz. Straightening or collapsing the tip joint of the finger will often fix the problem.

In the *Prelude to Cello Suite No. 1* by J.S. Bach we have this formation in measure #21 (Example #8):

Example 8. *Prelude from Cello Suite No. 1* (J.S. Bach) measure #21

Straighten or collapse the
tip joint of the second finger.

Many players will find that their second finger pulls the third string down towards the open second string, producing a buzz or sometimes damping the string entirely. Once again, straightening the tip joint of the second finger or allowing it to collapse will fix the problem. In some instances, this technique enables the player to push a string out of the way of another string to provide *extra* clearance.

Let me show you (Video #8).

Tech Tip Collapse Left-Hand Tip Joints Video #8: Prelude from Cello Suite No. 1 (Bach)

CLICK TO WATCH THE VIDEO on douglasniedt.com

Tech Tip Collapse Left-Hand Tip Joints Video #8: Prelude from Cello Suite No. 1 (Bach)

A similar example occurs in *Pavane for a Dead Princess* by Maurice Ravel (Example #9):

Example 9. *Pavane for a Dead Princess* (Maurice Ravel) measure #17-18

Collapse the tip joint
of the second finger

VII IX IX II //

T 7 9 9 9 9 0 9 11 4 2 //

A 9 9 9 9 9 12 9 9 5 2 //

B 8 8 11 9 9 13 9 9 2 2 //

7 2

Although some players will be able to play the chord with no adjustments to their tip joints, for many it is crucial that the tip joint of the second finger bends so that the second string is not pulled into the first string.

Watch me demonstrate in this final riveting video (Video #9).

Tech Tip Collapse Left-Hand Tip Joints Video #9: Pavane for a Dead Princess (Ravel)



Summing Up

In general, when a passage, chord, ornament, or pull-off (especially in the upper reaches of the fretboard) seems to be very unstable or difficult to play, allow the tip joint of the first or second finger to straighten or collapse. Often, that will fix the problem or at least improve the consistency of execution.

Collapsing or straightening the tip joint of a left-hand finger has the potential to:

- 1. Provide an anchor to stabilize a chord formation.**
- 2. Provide extra leverage to successfully execute a pull-off or an ornament containing a pull-off.**
- 3. Prevent pulling a string into another string thereby maintaining optimal string spacing. In some cases, collapsing the tip joint will enable the player to intentionally push a string away from another for extra clearance.**