

One of the Top Ten Foul and Nasty Habits: Allowing Left-Hand Fingers to "Help" a Barre

By Douglas Niedt

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THE TOP TEN NASTY HABITS of Guitar Technique

This article is the second in a series published from time to time, of common technical bad habits that can wreak havoc with your playing. They are presented in no particular order of importance.

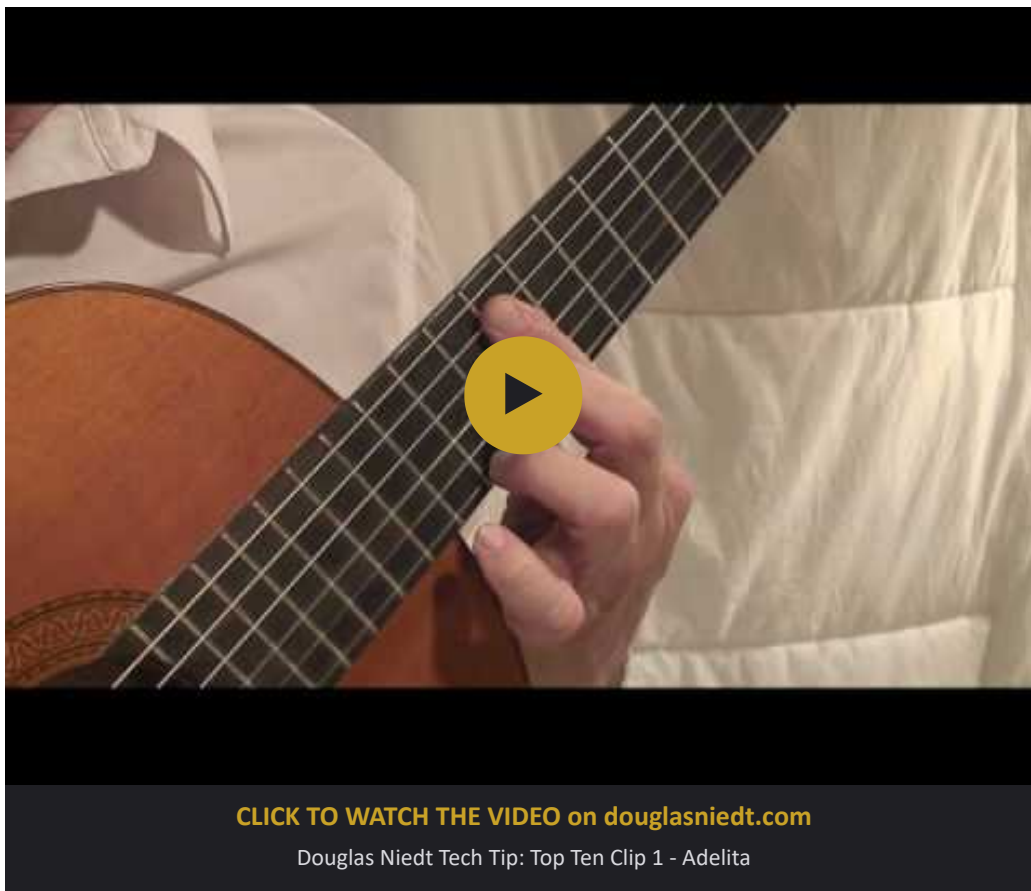
The nasty habit occurs while reaching for or holding a barre with the first finger. The guitarist places the second finger on top of the first finger to "help" it hold the barre tightly. Or, it can be a subtle in-the-blink-of-the-eye quick extension or straightening of the finger, taking it out of position. It can happen for a brief instant or last for several beats of a measure. It is commonly seen while a player holds or reaches for a full barre, but also happens when barring fewer than six strings. I see it in a wide range of playing ability, from late beginners through intermediate players.

Why It Matters

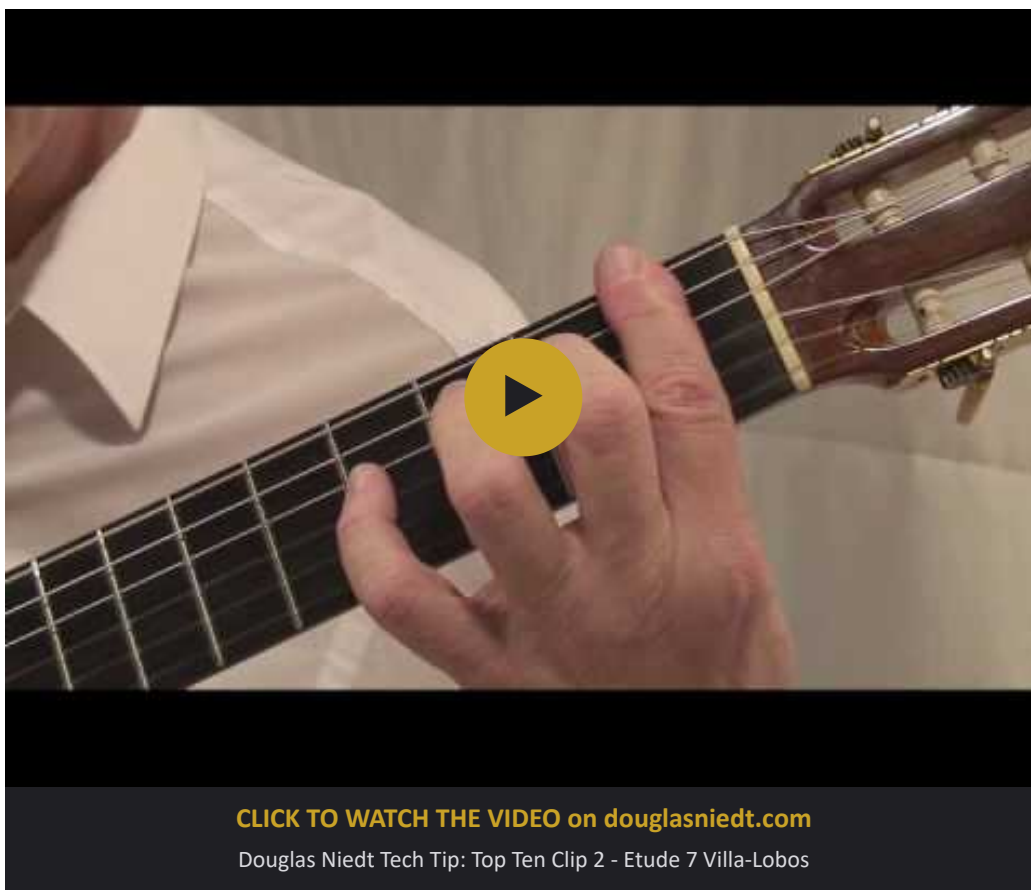
This is a big problem for three reasons.

1. Allowing the second finger to climb on to the barring finger puts the second finger out of position to play what is coming next.

Watch gripping video clip #1 as I play an example from Francisco Tárrega's *Adelita*, demonstrating this vile habit.

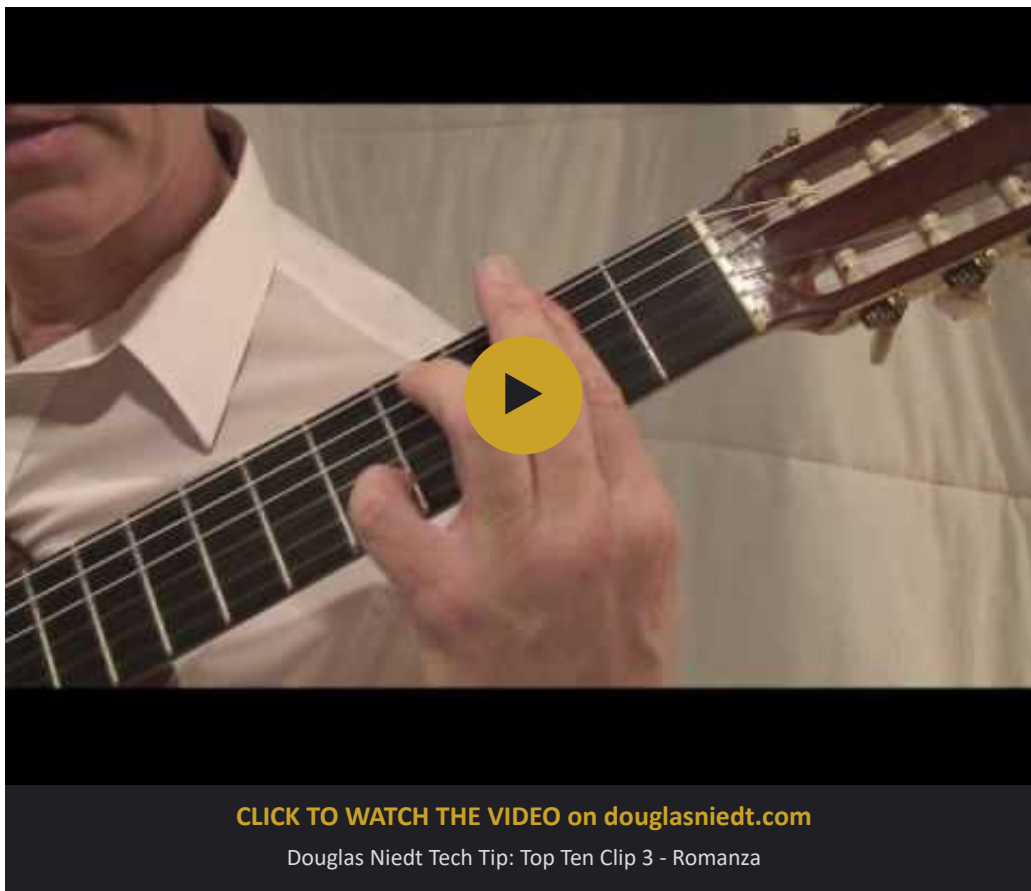


Can't get enough of watching such revolting images?
Try this example from Villa-Lobos' *Etude #7*. Video clip #2:

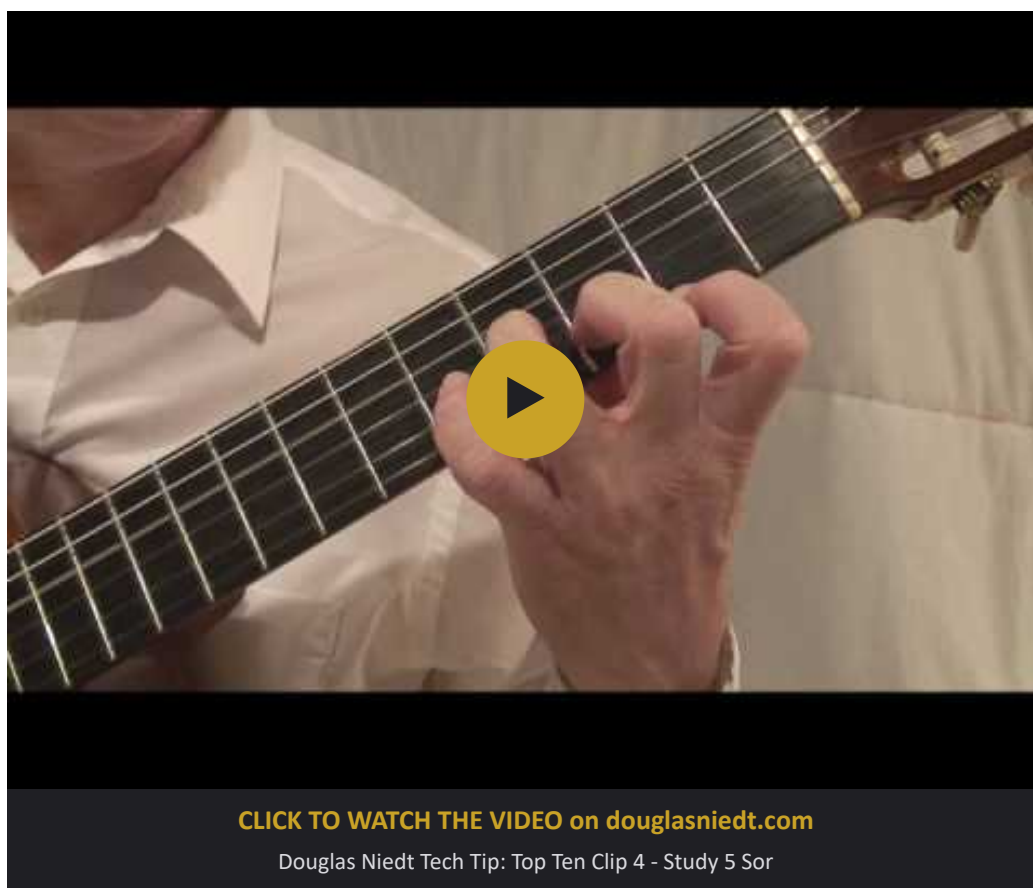


2. This nasty habit can also distort the entire hand position, pulling other fingers out of position as well.

Watch video clip #3 from the well-known *Romanza*, also known as *Romance de Amor*.



I know. You probably had to pull your eyes away from the screen during some of that. Here is another distressing example of hand position distortion from Fernando Sor's famous *Study #5 in b minor*. Video clip #4:

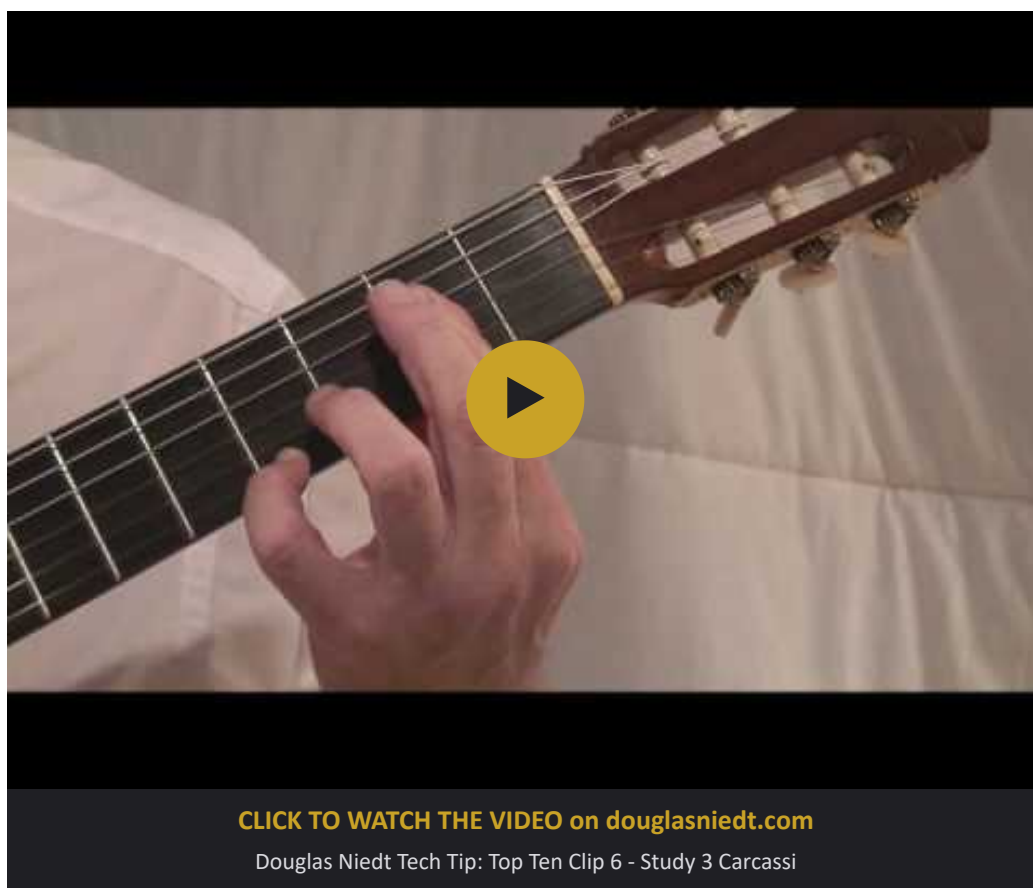


Have you no shame? You must live on the dark side if you want to watch video clip #5. This example from Villa-Lobos' *Etude #1* shows how this deplorable habit causes bad finger positioning AND hand distortion at the same time!



These problems don't occur only on full barres. They can be a problem in smaller barres as well.

Watch this harrowing example from Carcassi's *Study #3* in video clip #6.



This nasty habit is not always obvious. Instead of the second finger blatantly crawling on top of the barre finger, in a flash it might only make a very quick stabbing movement or straightening movement across the fretboard. But the end result is the same—the seemingly innocuous habit leaves devastation in its wake—missed notes, buzzes, frustration, and one angry guitar player miffed that he messed up the passage for the umpteenth time.

Watch this poignant, heartbreaking example from Enrique Granados' *Spanish Dance #5*. Video clip #7:



3. Long term, this fault weakens your barre technique. You never fully develop the strength and independence of the muscles to properly execute barres.

Yes, you will still be able to play power chords and Neil Diamond songs, but don't hope for much more than that!

How to Fix It

Defective barre technique is usually at the root of this bad habit. When a barre doesn't come out clearly due to faulty technique, the inclination is to "help" the barre with another finger. Bad barre technique includes using the thumb instead of the arms as the primary source of strength to hold the barre, incorrect thumb positioning, incorrect rear knuckle positioning of the barre finger, and incorrect barre finger positioning. Improving your barre technique will make it easier to cure this habit. Go to my Vault and see my tech tip on barring for more information on correct barre technique.

One quick fix for an unclear barre is to raise the back joint of the barre finger. This will help the barre come out clearly with less effort and possibly cure the problem of the second finger leaning towards or climbing on top of the barre finger.

Watch this Oscar-nominated video clip as I demonstrate. Video clip #8:



Another relatively easy fix for this habit is to roll the barre finger to the right, up against the fret. This forces the second finger away from the barre finger. It can also potentially make the barre come out more clearly with a little less effort.

Watch this stunning video clip. Definitely worthy of an Emmy nomination. Video clip #9:



Sometimes, simply being aware of the problem and monitoring the fingers allows a player to correct the bad habit.

Try out this simple exercise and observe your second finger. Video clip #10:



Although it may seem I make light of this habit, it IS a definite problem that needs to be corrected. Fortunately, it is fairly easily corrected and you will see a pretty dramatic improvement in the ease and accuracy of execution of passages that use barre chords.

Plus, once you correct this detestable habit, you will find that people who once looked away when you played barre chord passages, or spoke in hushed whispers when you played barre chords, will commend you for your efforts to become more refined in your technique. You will now be welcomed as a valuable member of polite society, instead of being seen as a ne'er-do-well guitarist with revolting barre technique.