

Training an Iberian for Competitive Dressage

By Tina Cristiani Veder and Bruno Gonzalez

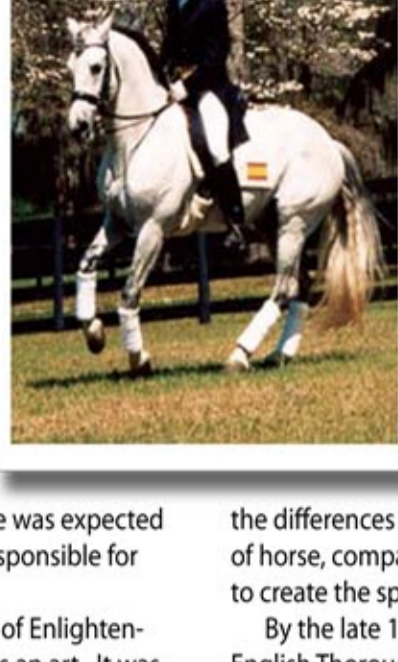
Over the centuries and across the world, horses have been selectively bred for specific purposes, thereby producing certain types and characteristics with each breed that created various methods of training and riding. Appreciating the difference between the classically bred and the competitively bred dressage horse enables us to tailor a training program that respects the heritage and the nature of the horse without creating injury.

HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES

The Iberian horse, the Spanish Andalusian or PRE, and the Portuguese Lusitano or PSL, has remained relatively unchanged throughout the centuries, and they still possess the qualities that made them the fountainhead of classical dressage and the most desired riding horse of the baroque era.

In order to understand how to condition and train the Iberian horse for competitive dressage we must first look to their past and the role they played in the development of classical equitation. It is important to understand the requirements of the classical horse of bygone years, namely his conformation, his gaits, and the work he was expected to do, because he was, to a great extent, responsible for the development of that training system.

So let us return to that magnificent Age of Enlightenment, when horsemanship was practiced as an art. It was during the 16th, 17th, and 18th centuries that collection reached its pinnacle along with the horses of the Iberian Peninsula. Extremely collected movements, culminating in the jumps and airs above the ground, became the highest of training exercises. Described in pen and captured in drawings by the fathers of equitation, such as La Guérinière, the Duke of Newcastle, and the Marquess of Marialva, the Iberian horses showed an uphill balance with a compact frame. Their natural suppleness and ability to round and step deeply under themselves were greatly prized attributes. These qualities gave them the advantage to perform the extreme movements expected in the manège (French for riding academy). A ground



covering extended trot was not a priority in the original development of these horses.

The training of the classical horse in post Renaissance Europe included finding balance and relaxation in the walk, trot and canter, increasing the suppleness of the horse's top line, and bringing the hind legs of the horse well under the rider's weight and closer to his center of gravity. Through this gradual process the forehead was raised and eventually the horse became strong enough in his hind quarters to support his weight with the rider and execute the movements asked of him without looking for support in the rider's hands. A truly finished horse was one who had achieved total self-balance and only required the slightest of weight aids from the rider to bring forth the desired movements with accuracy and ease.

Just as we look to the origins of classical dressage in order to understand the training of a particular type of horse and way of riding, we must also look to the origins of competitive dressage to understand

the differences between each. There was a dissimilar type of horse, compared to the horses from Iberia, that helped to create the sport of dressage.

By the late 1700's the outdoor horse, mainly the English Thoroughbreds, with their sleek, horizontal bodies and ground covering strides, introduced the sport of racing and cross country jumping. The hunt and chase on horseback had become very popular and was the beginning of a revolution in the equestrian world. By the early 1800's military schools across Europe were preparing their cavalry outdoors in the field, and had, for the most part, rejected the "outdated" high school work of the manège. In this new theatre of operation, the highly collected, classically trained, round horse was considered a relic of the past.

Many controversies ensued over the classical and the campaign methods of preparing horses for cavalry use. There were brilliant horsemen such as François Baucher,

Above: Bruno on the Andalusian stallion Aureolo performs a pirouette.

James Fillis, General Decarpentry, Steinbrecht, L'Hotte, and Beudant, to name a few, who emerged during this time of change. Their theories, practices, illustrations, and writings have left modern horsemen with a plethora of concepts and methods for attaining balance, suppleness, and lightness. It is important to note that their equine pupils were horses far different in nature than the round and flexible Iberian horse. For the most part, they worked with Thoroughbred types who were stiffer and less supple, and had a different way of using themselves.

In the early part of the 20th century, equestrian events were introduced into the first Olympics held at Stockholm, Sweden with Grand Prix dressage being one of the disciplines recognized. The Grand Prix test of the first 1912 Olympic Games was a far cry from today's FEI Grand Prix dressage test. At that time, only cavalry officers were allowed to compete and jumping had to be included in the relatively simple, lower level (compared to modern standards) dressage test. At this time, there were no piaffe, passage, or canter pirouettes in the test. Jumping over obstacles, four changes of lead on a straight line, and turn on the haunches, plus lengthening and collection within each gait was the extent of the test. The origin of competitive dressage as a sport had commenced and it rewarded a horse with obedience and courage in lieu of lightness and collection. With the invention of the automobile and tractor, the breeding strategies changed in Northern Europe and soon their work horses were crossed with lighter and hotter breeds to develop 'horses for sport' commonly referred to as Warmbloods. For competitive dressage, it became the breed of choice because of its ground covering extensions, it was more

supple than the Thoroughbred and was calmer in temperament. However, not all of these big moving horses could make it to the top of the sport once the high school movements such as piaffe, passage and canter pirouettes were introduced in the International levels of competition.

DIFFERENCES TO CONSIDER

The difference between classical horsemanship and competitive dressage basically comes down to the type of horse that is used and the ultimate goal to be achieved by the horse and rider. Even though competitive dressage was based on the principles of classical horsemanship, competitive dressage rewards a very different frame, balance, and movement than was desired in the early classical School.

Referring to illustrations A and B, in illustration A, the classical horse is moving forward and up, whereas the competitive horse in illustration B is moving forward and more horizontal. The training pyramid used in competitive dressage today was inspired by this later type of horse. It was designed to bring a strong, big gaited, horizontally-built horse back and into collection by keeping him between the legs and the hand of the rider while driving him forward. You will also notice the difference in the movement between the horses. The classical horse in A is already in a degree of elevation. The B horse is straighter and more mechanical in movement and will require increased flexibility to find the elevation needed for the collected work. With this type of horse the degree of collection is limited because of their natural ability. In very recent years we are seeing the breeding and competing of Northern European horses who are exhibiting the qualities

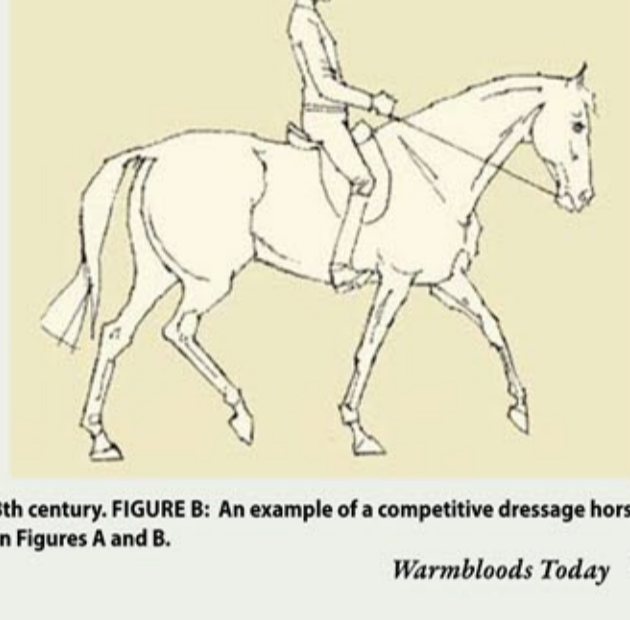
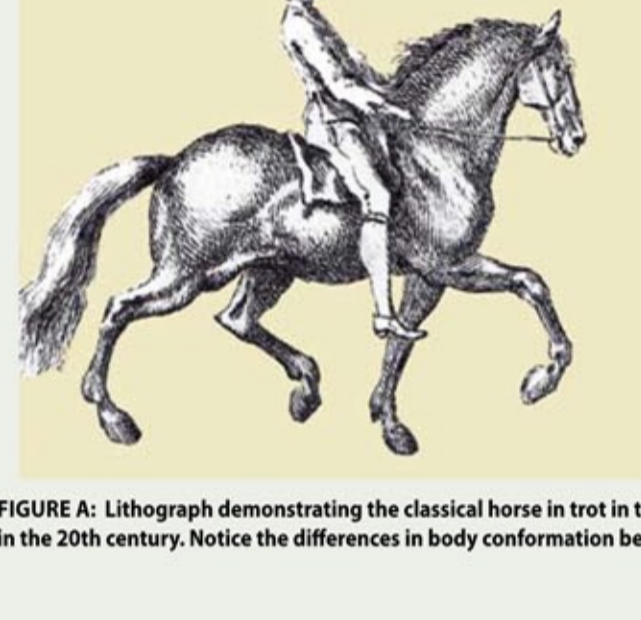


FIGURE A: Lithograph demonstrating the classical horse in trot in the 18th century. FIGURE B: An example of a competitive dressage horse in the 20th century. Notice the differences in body conformation between Figures A and B.

of an uphill, elevated classical horse. As a result, they are beginning to perform the level of collection that was achieved during classical times.

So, how does someone approach the training of a classically built Iberian horse with goals towards competitive dressage?

LUNGE WORK

The Iberian horse should be started on the lunge without side reins. Before putting the horse in side reins on the lunge the trainer should look to see that the walk, trot, and canter are in a steady rhythm. In other words, the horse must follow the circle without leaning to the outside or falling to the inside of the circle. At the same time, he must keep a soft and steady tension on the lunge line. When this process becomes effortless for the horse then side reins can be added.

A word of caution: The side reins should never be used to force the horse into a fixed frame. With a compact horse it is easy to set the side reins too short which creates a restriction of movement. The horse needs to maintain the freedom of movement he previously possessed without the use of the side reins. Control should always come through relaxation and physical development. The side reins are adjusted to a length that produces a slight flexion of the poll without changing the horse's balance downward and putting him onto his forehead. At this point, the trainer should encourage the horse to create a connection of energy which originates from his hind legs, flows through his body, and is softly received in the side reins. The horse will show some tension with the introduction of this new element because it is a different way of working for him; for that reason, the lunge work needs to continue until the horse finds relaxation and connection in this new frame.

It is through the strengthening of the hind legs and muscle mass of the haunches that the horse will start to move more into the contact of the side reins with acceptance and lightness. For the Iberian horse, or similar types that have a lot of elevation, it is beneficial to introduce cavalletti work. Working over cavalletti will help

the horse to understand the manner in which to use his body while generating more power from his hind legs. It is imperative to remove the side reins when working over cavalletti in order to allow the horse to use his back freely. When the horse has reached a level of fitness that allows him to maintain active, balanced movement, without tension on the lunge, then the saddle work should begin.

SADDLE WORK

When the Andalusian or Lusitano is first ridden, there is always a loss of movement and balance. They may become quick and shorten their stride. This is natural and expected. At this phase of their development, the rider must help the horse to regain their natural movement and balance through an exercise program of walk and trot in straight lines, circles, and changes of direction. It

is important for the rider not to force or fix the horse into any particular frame. For example, if the horse has a high set neck, then he should be ridden in that balance, which is more natural for him. If the horse's neck is set low, then it should not be brought up, except to regain balance and relaxation. The roundness of the neck will occur later when the rider can ride the hind legs of the

horse more under. At that point, the horse will begin to find contact in the rider's hand and the rider will find the ideal position of the neck which will create relaxation for the horse. When the horse can sustain active movement in the walk and trot without a change in balance and still maintain calmness then it is time to introduce the canter work. Achieving the same goals in the canter as in the walk and trot is the objective.

During this early saddle work, and until the horse finds a level of physical development, there will be periods when he loses his balance and a moment of tension will ensue. When this happens, it is important for the rider not to forcibly control the horse by closing him in between the legs and the hands. It is preferred to use downward transitions to help regain his equilibrium. When balance and relaxation are restored using the downward transitions, then the horse can return to the gait in which he was being previously schooled.



Example of the proper length of the side reins when used on a young horse. This is Invicto, a four year old pure Spanish Andalusian, owned by Meghan Watt of Wilton, NY.



While visiting Tina and Bruno's farm, Juan Rubio Martinez, a senior rider from the Royal School in Jerez, works a Lusitano stallion that Bruno trained. "Espirito" performs an extended trot.

It is also critical not to block the forward willingness of the horse in an effort to gain control of him. The rider should always control the horse through relaxation and light contact. Another important point to consider is that the rider should never activate the horse beyond what the horse can physically handle. This is a mistake often made while schooling Iberians to achieve big, expressive, and forward-looking movement. If the horse is pushed beyond his ability to step under and engage his hindquarters, it will cause him to lose his balance, throw himself into the rider's hands, and get tense and quicken his paces. Under these conditions the impulsion and carrying power of the horse is compromised.

From the start of the saddle work, a classical horse being prepared for competitive dressage needs to find a longer frame and length of stride. This must be accomplished without losing his natural qualities that will be employed later for the collected work, namely the ability to step under and come back on his haunches, and the ability to collect himself easily while remaining supple. Very often riders try to achieve this "opening of the frame and gaits" by forcibly driving the horse into the hand and thereby creating a strong contact. This is not ideal for an Iberian since the horse will learn to move forward by bracing and supporting his balance in the rider's hands, instead of using his hind legs to correctly push up and through to carry himself forward. The rider initially needs to patiently spend time strengthening the horse's basic gaits of walk, trot, and canter in order to lengthen his topline. Once the horse can perform all his transitions in and out of the basic gaits with good balance and fluidity, you can gradually begin to open

his gaits and lengthen his frame. For some horses this balance develops quickly in a matter of months, whereas other horses are slower to develop and can require years.

When the horse has found balance and relaxation at the walk, trot, and canter and can maintain these basic gaits with a light support of the rider, then it is time to begin the lateral movements. The lateral movements such as leg yielding, shoulder-in, and haunches-in were developed to supple and further strengthen and increase flexibility. These movements allow the horse to become more round through their topline. Only when the horse has found enough lateral flexibility and has developed enough muscle to maintain their bending, while at the same time performing the lateral movements with ease, can we start to think of asking for more activity from the hind legs. Before asking for the lengthening of stride, it is crucial that the rider is able to feel the hind legs of the horse stepping more under their weight, while still maintaining relaxation through the horse's body.

The rider can begin the medium and extended trot and canter when the horse can lengthen the frame and keep his body supple. In cases where the horse wants to brace against the rider by quickening his tempo when asked to lengthen his gaits, the rider should try to activate the hind legs and lengthen the stride through the lateral movements. For example, if the rider asks for a medium trot across the diagonal, and the horse tries to quicken and brace, the rider should immediately ask the horse to yield to the leg laterally until he feels that the horse finds relaxation and regains his balance. After that, the



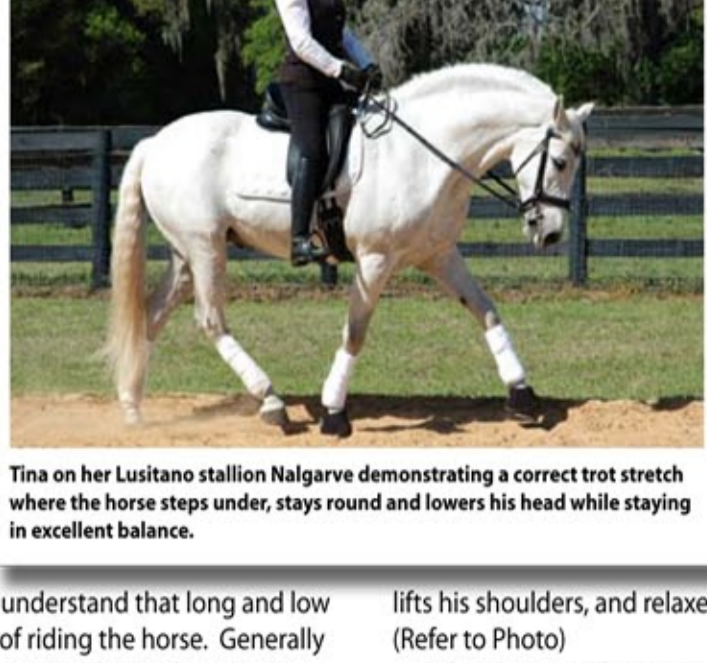
Bruno riding Tejo, a twelve year old Lusitano stallion, demonstrating an engaged, uphill, relaxed piaffe.

rider can once again proceed with the medium trot. This rebalancing exercise should be done until the horse clearly understands how to respond to the driving aids of the rider by offering more impulsion without tension.

In conclusion, the Iberian horse finds the forward movement through strength and flexibility (freedom of movement), not by forcing the head down (or in any unnatural position) and kicking the horse forward, as is often seen. Riders should find accuracy through the physical conditioning of their horse, and the development of their feel, and not through forceful riding and exhausting repetition.

RIDING LONG AND LOW

It is important that the rider understand that long and low is an exercise and not a way of riding the horse. Generally this exercise goes against how most Iberian horses are



Tina on her Lusitano stallion Nalgarve demonstrating a correct trot stretch where the horse steps under, stays round and lowers his head while staying in excellent balance.

built by nature, which is uphill. As a result, there should be a physical preparation before this exercise is practiced with them, just as one would prepare a horse for a new movement which would produce a change in his balance.

To force a horse to put his head down while driving him forward is not the real purpose of long and low. Instead it should be used as an exercise to begin to open the frame after warming the horse up first in his natural balance.

While using the exercise of long and low, the rider should begin to lengthen the frame through relaxation and not impulsion. The most important aim of this exercise is that the horse engages his hind legs,

lifts his shoulders, and relaxes his head forward and down. (Refer to Photo)

When long and low is done correctly, the horse will not

fall on his forehead bearing his weight in the rider's hands and causing him to become rigid and out of balance. Riding a horse long and low should always be the result of the horse being round and balanced first. It is not, as often believed, the method in which to achieve balance and roundness.

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the most rewarding and pleasurable experiences in the life of a rider with goals set for the competitive arena. 17

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Tina Cristiani Veder owns Caballos de los Cristiani, and Andalusian and Lusitano farm located in upstate NY and Ocala, FL. Born into a famous European equestrian circus family from Italy, Tina was privileged to ride horses in her youth trained by a prominent Portuguese rider/trainer Victor Roberto de Vasconcellos. She received classical instruction from 3 generations of the Konyot family. Her focus is to breed, sell and promote Iberian Horses for classical and competitive dressage.

Bruno Gonzalez Parrondo partnered with Tina 15 years ago. He is a dressage trainer from Spain internationally recognized for his training program and curriculum especially for Iberian horses. Together they have bred and trained numerous IALHA regional and national champions. They breed, import and sell high quality horses to professionals and amateurs, and recently exported two Lusitano stallions to Australia to help establish the breed there. Their website is www.andalusian-usa.com.