

Iberian Horses in Competition Dressage

By Sarah Gately-Wilson

The History

Over 500 years ago, dressage was developed using the Iberian horse, a horse square in conformation with aptitudes for collection and elevation. Equestrian Academies were built to house and school these horses to the highest levels, performing the airs above the ground. In the classical school each horse had recognized strengths to perform particular movements and was schooled to enhance and perfect their strongest areas. The horses performed in smaller arenas as they were expected to demonstrate high levels of collection, elevated movements, and the ability to change gaits quickly and agilely. Today, the arena is over twice as long and wide. The arenas are bigger because the horses are bigger and more apt to extend and hold their gaits for periods of time. Dressage today is designed for Warmblood horses built on rectangular frames with great ability to move forward in long, graceful strides. No longer do trainers look to train a horse towards his individual strengths, but rather to train for the overall performance, moving up the levels by passing each test. Competition dressage is now geared towards the rectangular horse, and though there are many who still practice the methods of the classical school as well as own and love Iberian horses, they rarely come out and compete.



5 year old Iberian Warmblood competing successfully in the dressage arena.

Many riders of the Iberian horse will tell you that classical dressage is not about competition. Others will say that though they would like to compete, they don't feel their Iberians will be judged fairly against the Warmbloods. In some cases this is true. Many judges are not used to watching Iberian horses compete and so may not be readily open to the differences. The only way to change this is to get Iberian horses out in to the public eye and compete. It is true that today's dressage is designed for the rectangular horses, but that doesn't mean the Iberian horses cannot compete and win. Spain's Olympic Dressage riders are proof of that! In the recent Olympic games held in Athens, Greece, the Spanish team rode three Iberian horses and one Warmblood to the team Silver medal in Dressage, proving it can be done: Iberian

horses can perform and win against Warmbloods in competitive dressage. The key to success: training!

In order for the Iberian to achieve success against the Warmblood in the ring the trainer must first understand the goals of FEI dressage and what the judges are looking for. Second, they must understand the Iberian horse, how and why he is typically trained using classical methods. And third, put the above together to school the Iberian to be competitive against the Warmblood. There is nothing written in the FEI rules that cannot be achieved by an Iberian horse. The same basic concepts from the classical school are still the focus of modern dressage. Judges are still looking for quality and smoothness of gaits and transitions. The horse is expected to be accepting of the bit and obedient, performing all of the required maneuvers willingly and with ease. At the advanced levels the FEI rules are almost identical to those written by de la Gueriniere (1668-1751) whose primary mount was the Iberian horse.

The Horse

Prior to discussing any specifics, it is important to point out that the Iberian breeds are becoming more diversified. There are many different types within the Andalusian, Lusitano, and Purebred Spanish horse. Some are being bred to stand over 16h and be more like sport horses; some are being bred to be smaller, 15.1h, short and agile with quick movements. Others are being bred to retain the classical conformation and move with some winging. For the most part, many breeders have bred out the traits of severe winging or dishing, but to some extent they still appear, and when small, are not considered a fault. Not all Iberians are suited for dressage. If a horse is not suited for dressage, that doesn't make it a bad horse, just not a good candidate for competitive dressage. That said, some dressage training will help and improve any horse, regardless of discipline, however, that is not the point of this article.



Andalusian stallion showing classic Spanish conformation. A strong head on an arched neck, well defined withers preceding a short back and broad, strong hindquarters. The mane is thick and abundant, the tail set low and hung tightly against the body.

Finding a Good Dressage Horse

There is a demanding market for horses ready to compete and win in the dressage arena. Some owners/trainers will take advantage of this by pushing young horses too hard and too fast for their mental and physical capabilities, turning out a horse that can perform the movements, but not perform them well, or correctly. When you see a four-year old horse performing piaffe and passage and starting other upper level airs, beware. Considering the right horse for your dressage partner requires you to consider yourself, your abilities, your expectations, and your budget. Being honest with yourself from the start will save much heartache later. Now, the horse: the dressage horse should have good overall conformation. He should not have an overly short back or an overly long back. He should move with an open shoulder and have three good gaits. The horse must have a good temperment and take all that is asked of him in good humor. The horse's current level of training, and any management issues should be considered as well, and often has different parameters for each individual. Taking into account the age of the horse and his current training, and watching him move at liberty, you should be able to discern if this is the horse for you and if he has the potential to take you to the levels of competition you wish to compete at. An entire article would be needed to cover all the points of finding the right horse, so we will leave it at that for now.

The Training

To see an Iberian horse dance with his long mane flowing and his feet barely making contact with the ground is an experience that can take your breath away. To the amateur eye, this is dressage, but to the competitor, trainer, and judge, there is a lot more to it. As beautiful and graceful as this fairy tale horse is, he still has problems and training issues that need to be addressed, just as every other breed does. To train the Iberian horse we need to identify his problem areas and look to the classical training methods designed towards this kind of horse to help him overcome any obstacles.

The image of the classical masters on well-balanced, relaxed Iberian horses is something to aspire to. When rectangular Thoroughbreds and Warmbloods replaced the Iberian horse as the in-fashion mount, the methods used for training also changed to be geared towards working with these rectangular horses. When working with the Iberian, we have to go back to the classical methods. The training methods that work well on rectangular horses tend to make the smaller collected square horse stiff and unwilling. These training methods will create a horse with a tight back that doesn't move forward or track under himself.

A horse may only be considered properly trained when by progressive and methodical gymnastics, without undue haste in the basic muscular suppling, he abandons himself to the rider's will without any revolt, assured that he will not be asked any movements which would be forced and would demand too much effort on his part.

Nuno Oliveira, Reflections on Equestrian Art.

Classical training builds up the strengths of each individual horse using gymnastics and feeling to improve on his weak areas. The goal in classical training is to produce an overall strong horse that is balanced and relaxed. In classical training, groundwork, basic horsemanship, and work under saddle are all equally important and used to allow the horse to find his own rhythm and naturally develop his balance. Let's take a look at some common problems found

with Iberian horses and the classical methods used to improve the horse and help him overcome these difficult areas.



Nuno Oliveira at the piaffe. From “Reflections on Equestrian Art” by Nuno Oliveira.

Problems and Solutions

Problem: False Collection

As already mentioned, the Iberian horse is square in conformation, which gives him the ability to look collected and perform elevated movements without much effort. Good? Not necessarily! The Iberian horse's compact body makes him very powerful and allows him to easily bring his hindquarters underneath himself, collecting with ease and elevating his forehand. The rectangular Warmbloods have to work harder to achieve high levels of collection because they are longer and it is more difficult to get their hindquarters underneath them. For a Warmblood to achieve the same level of collection they must work to strengthen the muscles of their back, stomach, and hind legs in order to raise their forehand and round their back. The problem is that many Iberians will cheat.

The Iberian horse can appear just as collected, but have a tight hollow back and raised head. To the amateur he will look magnificent, but the trained eye will see that he is avoiding contact with the bit staying behind the bridle and with his back tight and hollow rather than rounded, his hindquarters fall out behind him. In another attempt to avoid contact with the bit, Iberians will take full advantage of their medium length, thick necks, and will over bend, evading contact with the bit on the bars of their mouths and flexing in the incorrect place. The horse must be taught to accept contact with the bit and only flex from the poll, keeping the poll as the highest point of the neck.



Above is a three-year old Andalusian stallion showing the ability to collect and elevate while well balanced at very early stages of training. Note that he brings his hind legs well underneath his body while moving forward.

Submission is about the willingness of the horse. The willing horse understands what is being asked of him and is confident enough in his rider and his training to react to the aids and perform the movement without fear or confusion. When a horse submits to his rider he moves with lightness and willingness that shows him to be in perfect harmony with his rider. The willing horse gives the impression of performing the required movements of his own accord, without being asked.

Since the Iberian has the natural ability for collection and elevation, trainers will often forego the preliminary and step-by-step training methods that they would use on other breeds and skip forward to more advanced steps. This is the mistake. Just because the horse can do it, doesn't mean he can do it right or that he doesn't need the basic training in order to progress correctly on to more advanced movements. Many short-coupled horses have trouble bending and flexing because their body is shorter and tighter. They will raise their head up and back, thus lifting the forehand and producing higher knee action. Masters of illusion! This is the opposite of collection. How do we fix it?

Solution: Stretch and Supple to Find a Swinging Relaxed Back

All horses need to develop a soft and relaxed swinging back. They need to be supple. There is currently a great deal of controversy over how you should train your Iberian horse, especially in regards to the "long and low" and "deep and round" methods. First, let us define what long and low is. Long and low, in the simplest terms, means that we encourage the horse to stretch from nose to tail. His head is slightly in front of the vertical and his mouth is seeking contact with the bit. His poll is lower than the withers and is connected to a lightly arched neck, stretching all the way along the topline to the tail. This picture is natural for any horse, it seems the controversy erupts when the technique is taken to the extreme, as is seen amongst some of the current European trainers with their Warmbloods.

There is even more controversy around deep and round and those who abuse it. Deep and round is defined as lowering the horse's neck bringing his poll below the withers (as in long and low), and pulling his nose behind the vertical. Much current research shows that by over-bending, the horse's airways are constricted making it difficult for him to breathe. The hazards and harm that can be done to the horse by using the deep and round method are very real and

makes it dangerous to the horse. For this reason, it is not encouraged that the horse purposely be ridden with his head pulled back to his chest as is too often seen in warm-up arenas in all levels of competition. Keeping that point in mind, there are some positives to this exercise. Some horses will of their own accord, naturally bend and stretch in this manner for a few strides. They should be allowed to give this stretch, as long as it is brief and they again resume contact with the bit and come back to the vertical. Working in this manner does bring the back up and engage the hindquarters. When allowing this, it is imperative to use caution and not allow the horse to continually over-bend, as he is likely using this as a technique to evade the bit. This is counterproductive and what we are trying to avoid!



Three-year old Andalusian stallion being encouraged to stretch and seek the bit while being worked in long lines without the impeding weight of a rider.

Why is this important? This exercise is meant to improve posture by strengthening muscles and suppling and relaxing the horse. If a person with poor postures visits the chiropractor they will be told they need to work at standing up straight, and to accomplish this they need to stretch and strengthen their abdominal muscles. Stomach muscles are key to holding up a person's frame in a good tall posture. The same is true for our equine counterparts! In order for the horse to be able to truly collect, engaging their hindquarters (tucked well underneath them) and lifting their forehand into a light, elevated cadence they need strong stomach and back muscles, as well as strong hock and stifles! In addition, developing good posture and strengthening these muscles will be invaluable to later work on the extended trot. Use these exercises with care and in moderation. They are meant to be just that: exercises, not an end result.



An example of deep and round out in the scenic countryside. This particular horse tends to have a high head carriage and when he does lower his head and stretch in this manner he is allowed. It is never for more than a few strides.

A tip for the rider: Keep your aids light. Use your seat and your legs to encourage the horse forward into your hands. At the same time, keep your hands soft and quiet. Receive the horse's contact without pulling back, but never allow the horse to become heavy in your hands. If the horse becomes heavy in your hands, use your inside rein in a half-halt and lighten his mouth and then start over, again asking him to stretch and seek contact with the bit.

The Gaits

Three gaits are recognized in competitive dressage: walk, trot, and canter. The horse needs three good natural gaits to start with. As the horse develops and progresses in training, the quality of the natural gaits will improve as he becomes more engaged with an open and free moving shoulder. The successful dressage horse will move through three gaits with lightness and elasticity.

Problem -- The Walk: Iberians are famed for their trots but often have difficulty with the walk. Surprisingly enough, the walk is the one gait that will likely require the most attention. Iberians have the tendency to march, rather than walk, taking short quick strides. They will hollow their back and take small steps, not tracking up behind and lacking impulsion.

Problem -- The Trot: As already noted, the Iberian is famed for its wonderful trot, this is not a problem, however, extension at any gait is often where difficulties arise. The common problem when asking Iberian horses to extend at the trot shows itself when they rush forward, heavy on the forehand, losing their natural high carriage or when they break into the canter, refusing to offer any extension at the trot. Here is where the opposition to long and low for Iberians will come back. Trainers will note that by encouraging Iberians to go long and low, you are pushing them onto their forehand, taking them away from their natural balance, and further exaggerating the problem encountered when asking for the extended trot.

Problem -- The Canter: In classical dressage the emphasis on elevated and on-the-spot movements was designed for Iberian horses. Today, the emphasis is on forward ground-covering movement and the Iberian is at a disadvantage, especially at the canter. Many Iberians are criticized for having too much height in their canter while not having enough forward movement.

The Classical Solution

Classical dressage uses gymnastic training methods to improve upon the horse's natural ability. The classical method incorporates many different exercises to build muscles and strengthen joints helping the horses to become better balanced and working towards the high school movements. When you strengthen the horse, his muscles and his joints, you give him the ability to collect and extend and execute different movements properly. These same principles should be used when schooling the Iberian for today's competition. The horse must work towards strong impulsion in the three school gaits: walk, trot, and canter. Remember the school gaits are different from the horse's natural gaits. With training the horse's school gaits show greater elevation, impulsion, and cadence than the natural gaits.

The foundation of dressage training must lie in the perfecting of impulsion in three natural gaits...

Nuno Oliveira, Reflections on Equestrian Art.

The foundation of the horse's training is in the constant transitions and variations between gaits. Changing gaits from walk to trot, to halt, to canter, and so on, all help to strengthen the horse's hindquarters. A common problem with the Iberian horse's walk is that it lacks impulsion. The goal is to produce a four-beated gait, where the hind legs reach far underneath the horse and the hind feet step into the footfalls of the front feet. In order for the horse to do this, he needs strong hind legs. Constant transitions strengthen the hind legs. Work at the shoulder-in and other lateral movements are also helpful in improving the walk by asking the horse to stretch his hind legs further under his body, thus carrying more weight on his hindquarters. Another exercise to improve the walk is to abandon the arena for rolling hills and other varying terrain. Walking the horse downhill naturally encourages him to step further underneath himself, this in turn not only strengthens the joints it also helps the horse develop better balance.

Asking the horse to vary his gaits, to extend and to collect, should not be an exhausting exercise for the rider or the horse. Extension should never require the rider to be chasing the horse using excessive leg or bouncing along at the sitting trot tiring the horse's back. Iberian

horses are highly sensitive and so the rider's aids should be very light and should be minimal. When asking the Iberian to extend at the trot, often he will break into a canter rather than lengthen his stride. The rider's instinct is to pull the horse back, reducing his gait and then try again. This may eventually work once the horse figures out what you are asking, but there is an easier way to communicate to the horse that you want him to extend at the trot and not just go faster. When asking him to extend, if he breaks his gait into a canter, don't hold him back, push him forward and then start to turn him on a circle. Keep your hand open and your leg on him, working on a smaller circle until he again begins to trot. In this case, the rider has not pulled the horse down into a trot, but rather pushed him forward into a trot from the canter. Moving forward does not equal moving faster. The energy produced from pushing the horse rather than pulling him, will result in a beautiful forward going trot with impulsion that would not exist if he wasn't encouraged to move forward.



The Andalusian gelding Celoso VIII, showing off his famous extended trot!

It is important that the Iberian horse aimed at competition dressage always be ridden forward. This must start at the beginning of his training. Actually, all young horses should be encouraged to move out and be ridden forward, not held back. When working the horse at a trot, the rider can vary the gait, change its cadence, all with subtle aids. By rising at the trot the rider can encourage the horse to collect by slowing the pace at which he rises and falls back to the saddle. To ask the horse to extend, the rider need only to increase the pace of their rise and urge the horse forward with a light leg. Often riders forget that their legs start at the hip. Urging the horse forward does not mean wrapping your calves around his barrel with each stride. Some horses, when already trained with strong aids, require heavy aids in order to evoke a response,

however, if the horse is trained from the beginning in a calm and quiet fashion, using light aids and always working in a forward manner, he will respond without exhausting his rider.

Impulsion is defined as moving forward with energy and power, it does not relate to speed. Impulsion is about a driving power that comes from behind and moves up the horse's spinal column through a supple and swinging back into the bridle. Impulsion can only be accomplished in a supple, straight horse that is balanced with true self-carriage.

When the horse is ridden forward, and he has developed strong muscles and joints through various exercises and constant transitions, then he will likely not have a problem with the canter. In many disciplines that the Iberian is primarily used for, such as Rejoneo (mounted Bullfighting) and Doma Vaquera (Stockman's dressage or in more general terms, cattle work), the horse is trained differently from the start. The disciplines have very different requirements than competition dressage and so you see a different horse. When training the Iberian for competition dressage, you train him to move forward, and once working well at the walk and trot, the canter will follow. It is important to give individual attention to perfecting each gait. If ample time is spent working on the walk, the horse will have a wonderful, calm four-beated gait with impulsion. Later, when the horse is asked to do more advanced movements, such as the Spanish Walk (which is a wonderful exercise to free the shoulder), it will be much more brilliant than if the school walk had not been perfected. It is the same with the trot and canter. *Note: Some will say that the Spanish Walk is an artificial gait with no place in dressage training, however, no one can deny that seeing Ignacio Rambla and Evento accepting their ribbon and dancing off in the Spanish step is magnificent!* Overall, if the Iberian is taught a proper walk by a trainer with patience and a calm quiet demeanor, the result is often a lovely, even, cadenced, four beated gait with lift and forward movement. It was the French master, Francois Baucher that wrote, "The walk is the mother of all gaits." His words are true; the walk is the foundation, the building block of the other gaits.

*Training a horse is a rational gymnastics course.
Nuno Oliveira, Reflections on Equestrian Art.*



The Main Idea

Classical dressage uses gymnastic training methods to improve upon the horse's natural ability. The classical method incorporates many different exercises to build muscles and strengthen joints helping the horses to become better balanced and working towards the high school movements. These same principles should be used when schooling the Iberian for today's competition. The one main difference is that many classical dressage trainers work to enhance each horse's individual abilities, to work in the areas where the horse shows the most aptitude. When training for today's sport, that isn't enough, we must not only enhance each horse's individual strengths, but also pay special attention to giving him a well-rounded education and build his weak areas as well. Today's dressage requires a horse that can perform all the movements well, not just some of the movements. Today's dressage is looking for a Renaissance horse, an Iberian horse. Go to it!