

Riding styles of the Iberian Peninsula

By Sarah Gately-Wilson

Today's equestrians adopt various styles of riding as their individual preferences. To some equestrians, riding is a competitive sport; to some it is an art, to others, simply a way of life. In the middle ages, horses were the primary mode of transportation, a weapon of war, and to royalty, an art for the high school dressage. The way the horses were ridden, then and now, depended on what purpose they were being used for.

In Spain, two styles of riding were known. The knights in their heavy armour rode heavy, cold-blooded warhorses. They rode with long stirrups, their legs and feet extended down and forward with their backs braced against the high cantles of their war saddles. This style of riding was known as riding *a la brida*.

The other style of riding was on fast, agile, hot-blooded chargers that turned quickly and were used by light cavalry and hunters. These riders had short stirrups with legs bent underneath them and were balanced on the horses back with the ability to stand up or move agilely on the horse. This style is known as riding *a la gineta*.

At one time it was considered a great accomplishment of men to be able to ride in both saddles, meaning to ride both *a la brida* and *a la gineta*. It was even marked on their gravestones! As times of war subsided, the need for the horses was in agriculture, to work cattle, to thrash grain, and for royalty, a luxury item for hunts and high school dressage.

Using the horses for both work and play, the Portuguese and Spaniards developed tests of functionality and performance to cull horses from their breeding programs that did not meet the criteria. These tests evolved into the formal disciplines of Doma Vaquera and Working Equitation, just as the men's sport of working the bulls to keep their horses in practice for times of war developed into Rejoneo, or mounted bullfighting. Today these exciting styles of riding are becoming more prominent around the world and are no longer just for the Iberian horses!



A Doma Vaquera Stockman heading out to the cattle with his garrocha.

Doma Vaquera

Doma Vaquera is known as the dressage of the stockman. The mounted stockman needs to be able to work cattle quietly, safely, and efficiently. He can only do this with a well-trained horse. In competition, the Vaquero rider must perform a series of movements at both walk and *galope* (canter and full gallop), the trot is not used. The rider's perform with reins in one hand, the other free or carrying the garrocha. The horse and rider must work in perfect harmony, exhibiting a rhythm while quickly and agily performing pirouettes, passes, turns, and changing pace between halt, walk, canter and full gallop without a moment of hesitation. The horse must be obedient and willing, never showing resistance to the rider, the rider never using force.

The Spanish stockman carries the garrocha, a very long pole used to work cattle and test bulls. The stockman carrying the garrocha is called a garrochista. The wooden garrocha has a metal point at one end and widens in diameter to a comfortable size for the hand to grasp. It is 14 feet in length. The rider holds the garrocha in his right hand, the reins in his left, and man and horse move in harmony, pirouetting and dancing around the garrocha, charging forward, and halting on a dime! In the field, these maneuvers are essential to quickly move or head off cattle. The dressage of the stockman is truly an art!

Acoso y Derribo

Acoso y derribo is Doma Vaquera work with young bulls. It translates to mean "pursue and bring down." In Spain the men are as passionate about their fighting bulls as they are about their horses. It is known and joked about that a Spaniard will sooner lend you his wife than his horse! In breeding the fierce fighting bulls the garrochista rides out amongst the bulls on his vaquera horse, and in the tradition of acoso y derribo, he tests the young bulls' courage, tenacity and ferocity, in suitability for the fighting ring. Challenging the bull is also a test of the Vaquero and his horse, their courage, stamina, and harmony.



Garrochista's testing a young bull.

To test the bulls two riders, one on each side of the animal, move him straight ahead at a full gallop, the garrochista uses the end of the garrocha to unbalance and bring down the bull.

The bull is judged on his will and expression to return to his feet and fight. This is what determines his heart for the fight in the ring. Only the best bulls are presented to fight.

Rejoneo

Rejoneo is mounted bullfighting. In Spain, Portugal, and Mexico, bullfighting is a time honored tradition. The fire and passion of the culture is displayed in the artistic meeting of man and beast. The people will speak of it with great reverence; they will speak of the love between man and beast. It is a different culture and not well understood or accepted by Americans. That does not diminish the art and the beauty of the horsemanship. As not to offend the audience, but to still recognize the great skill of the Rejoneador (or Rejoneadora) and their horses, let's speak of the bloodless bullfight and its growing popularity in California and around the world.



Pablo Hermoso, a famous Rejoneador and crowd favorite!

The bullfight varies between countries and customs, the attire of the fighter varies, however, the performance and amazing skill of the horse that sashays and dances round the bull, evading his attacks and tiring him, does not! In Portugal, the men dress in aristocratic costumes and ride their native Lusitanos in ornate saddles and bridles. They are called Cavaleiros (fem. Cavaleiras) In Spain, the men dress in Leather chaps (called *zahones*) and boleros and ride their Spanish or sometimes *Tres Sangué* (three blooded Spanish, Arab, and Thoroughbred) horses in Vaquero saddles and bridles. They are called Rejoneadores (fem. Rejoneadoras).

In the bloodless bullfights the bull wears a velcro jacket and the banderillas used to stab him are fuzz tipped. Before the bull enters the ring the mounted Rejoneador enters the ring and is handed the first banderillas. He then rides his horse around the ring dancing and exhibiting his

mount while warming up. He will dedicate the bull to someone of honor, handing them his hat and signaling that he is ready for the bull.

When the bull enters the ring the man and horse piaffe and passage trying to get the bulls attention, taunting him to charge. The best bulls will be fierce and charge horse and rider, others may require more taunting to get his attention. As the bull charges the horse, the Rejoneador will signal his mount to pass closely to the side, or to turn and move just out of reach of the bull with his tail in the bull's face. The Rejoneador will continue to work the bull judging his bravery and skill. He will make very close passes and ride his horse with no reins using both hands to strategically place some of the banderillas in the velcro jacket on the bull. When he has a feel for the bull, he will change horses and continue with the fight.

The bloodless bullfight is extremely challenging to the Rejoneador and his horse. Since the bull is not being physically injured, he does not tire as easily or quickly, making the meeting that much more dangerous. The fighter must rely on his highly trained and finely skilled horse, or both may lose their lives. At the end of the bullfight, the man and horse are judged and the audience shows their appreciation with applause and roses thrown into the ring. It is a spectacular sight!

Doma de Trabajo (Working Equitation)

Working Equitation is one of the world's newest equine sports. Competitions testing the functionality and performance of horses and rider have been taking place in Europe and more recently South America. Over the past two years, demonstrations, clinics, and a few preliminary tests are being embraced by the Iberian horse enthusiasts in the United States. Working Equitation is an exciting way to test the horse, his functionality and practical use with a work in dressage, obstacle courses, and with cattle. The horse and rider are supposed to be dressed in the native tack and attire of their country.

There are four stages of Working Equitation. The first stage is a dressage test. At this time there are two levels in which to compete, the upper level demanding flying changes and pirouettes. The horses are judged on their obedience and ability to execute the required movements without hesitation or fault.

The second and third stages of Working Equitation focus on the obstacle course. As in Doma Vaquera, the riders work at the walk and canter, the trot is not used. The obstacles consist of things that may be found in everyday working environments, including crossing bridges, jumping barrels, passing through gaits and other obstacles that Americas often use in their Gymkhana events. Stage two judges the horse and rider for accuracy and skill. In stage three, the course is repeated for speed. Stage two and three are competed at novice, intermediate and advanced levels.

The fourth stage is a team test of cow-cutting. The riders must cut a group of cows from a herd, one at a time and place them in containment. While the team works together, the individual who is competing and being judged is expected to do most of the work.

Riding Lusitano horses and competing in native attire, the Portuguese riders have dominated the European and World Championships in Working Equitation. The Portuguese attribute their success to generations of using horses to work cattle and perform agricultural duties, as well as to the horses themselves. The Lusitano horses are generally smaller, very round and agile, and have great heart. Their success in Rejoneo and Working Equitation is proof of their skill.

The traditions and culture of the Andalusian people have a strong influence on the style and work they give to their horses. The horses, like the people, are full of fire and passion. They work hard, they play hard, and they do it all with flair. It is wonderful to see the American people welcome and embrace the Spanish horses and allow them to use their natural talents to perform the mundane tasks of everyday with finesse!

