

Dressage and the Iberian Horse: Past, Present, and Future

By Sarah Gately-Wilson

Dressage has undergone many changes since the Renaissance Era. Originally dressage was an art, in which, nobility rode square horses, Iberian horses that moved upwards and danced from side to side performing ballet like maneuvers such as the airs above the ground. Today, such riding can only be found on the Iberian Peninsula, at the circus, and in some remaining schools still dedicated to classical riding, the most famous being the Spanish Riding School of Vienna. When we attend a dressage show today, the riding differs drastically from what it once was. The horses and training are different as well. No longer are we seeing noble men riding square horses and performing the art of the classical school, instead we are witnessing forward going rectangular horses that take your breath away with their long, ground-eating strides competing in a sport that is dominated by women. The following is an attempt at an un-biased study of the history of dressage, the Iberian horse, and his role in classical dressage and the development of the FEI standards.

The object of dressage is the harmonious development of the physique and ability of the horse. As a result, it makes the horse calm, supple, loose and flexible, but also confident, attentive and keen, thus achieving the perfect understanding with his rider. From the FEI statement.

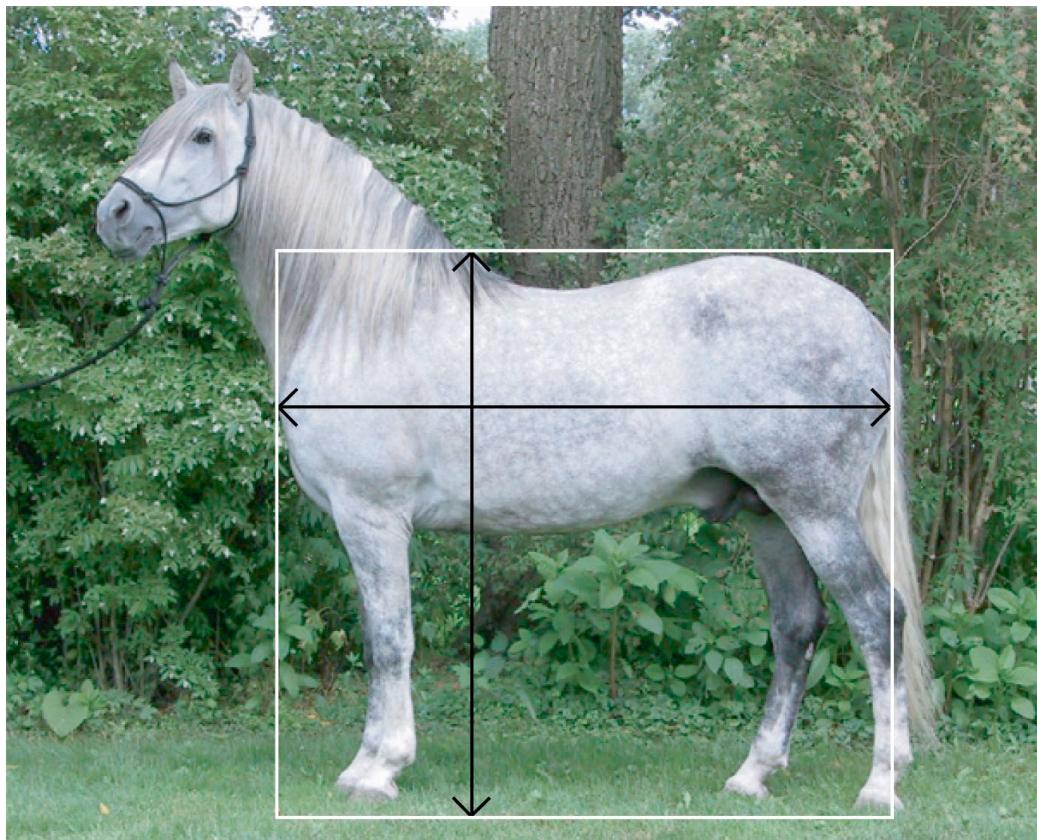
First, let us consider two kinds of horse used for dressage: the square horse and the rectangular horse. At this point, we should also separate dressage into two categories: classical dressage, as performed throughout history most commonly with Iberian and Lipizzaner horses, and FEI or competition dressage, what we typically see when attending open breed shows. Understanding these two different types of conformation plays a key role when looking at the history of dressage and what we see today.

The horse thus gives the impression of doing of his own accord what is required of him. From the FEI statement.

A square horse is one in which the height of the horse to his withers is equal to the length of the horse from the point of his shoulder to the point of his hindquarters. Iberian horses have square conformation. The square horse has great natural ability for the collected movements since his hindquarters can easily be brought underneath him towards the forehand. These movements include the piaffe, passage, and pirouette. The square horse usually shows average talent for the extended gaits, lacking the big range a rectangular horse will have. The rectangular horse is typified by most sporthorses and warmbloods. A rectangular horse is one in which the height of the horse to its withers, is less than the length of the horse from the point of its shoulder to the point of its hindquarters. Opposite the square horse, the rectangular horse has great aptitude for extensions because of his long back; he is able to take longer strides. The rectangular

horse has an average talent for collection, as it is more of a challenge to bring his hindquarters underneath him towards the forehand.

The natural balance of the horse dictates that it should carry more weight on its stronger hindquarters and less weight on its weaker forehand. For the square horse, this is easy, he has little trouble bringing his hind legs under his body mass and engaging his hindquarters to drive him forward. However, for the rectangular horse, which has a longer body, finding a natural balance is more difficult and causes more stress on him, physically speaking. The rectangular horse must work harder to bring his hind legs further underneath the weight he is carrying and engage his hindquarters.



Andalusian stallion with square conformation. This stallion shows correct conformation for a Spanish horse with a short back, high set neck, powerful quarters, sub-convex head, almond-shaped eye and thick, abundant mane and tail. Also notice the long sloping shoulder and low set tail, which help this horse engage his hindquarters lifting his front end into collection.

Good trainers are finding ways to enhance the abilities of both types of horses. Different exercises, such as the Spanish walk, where the horse is asked to bring his front leg forward and up, will enhance the square horse's ability to extend by suppling his shoulder. Likewise, work in hand, where the horse can develop a natural balance without carrying the weight of the rider, helps the rectangular horse collect and engage his hindquarters.



Pure Spanish stallion working in long lines.

The Past

The Iberian is one of the oldest breeds of horse, dating as far back as 17,000 BC by engravings and cave paintings. The Iberian is the foundation sire of many of today's dressage horses, including the Lipizzaner, Thoroughbred, and most of our warmbloods. Originally, the Iberian was bred to be a war horse, but during the Renaissance, times were peaceful and the horses were used for new disciplines. The Iberian exhibited natural ability to collect and the agility and animation essential for high school movements and the airs above the ground. Their abilities made them a favorite for dressage, which became the preferred discipline of riding among nobility. *Note: At this time, the warmbloods of today, the Hanoverian, Trakehner, Dutch and Swedish, etc. did not exist as we know them. They were heavier, more draft like, and used to pull heavy carriages and artillery. It wasn't until the late 1700s and 1800s that these horses began to be refined into saddle horses by the infusion of Iberian blood. Read on:*

During the Renaissance horsemanship became a highly polished art. In the early 1400s, King Duarte I of Portugal founded the Academy of Equestrian Art. The Iberian horse was no longer a vehicle of war. In 1603 King James I observed, "the honourablest and most commendable games that ye can use are on horseback, for it becommeth a Prince better than any other man to be a fair and good horseman." Previously, the Iberian had been carefully bred and schooled to reflect military might. Kings and nobleman preferred a magnificent mount and with the monarch in the lead, fortunes were spent to build beautiful royal stables and stud farms and provide the court with these mighty chargers. Military riding academies were built for the purpose of training horse and rider for warfare. The airs above the ground, such as the capriole, are used for evasion; the levade for firing at a vantage point, and the piaffe for keeping the horse awake and ready. Haute Ecole (high school) training and movements came to be revered by its participants.

and the Spanish horse's unparalleled capabilities made him the heart of the discipline. The best-known school was, of course, the Spanish Riding School. It originated in Italy but was later moved to Vienna. Iberians were imported into Austria for the school and were bred to local horses. Their descendants, the Lipizzans, are still used in the school today.



George Hamilton's (1672-1737) portrayal of the Spanish horse shows his short back, arched neck, and strong sturdy body.

At the beginning of the 1600s, horses were being trained to achieve harmony and lightness and the riders were using primarily weight aids, minimal hands, soft bits and no spurs. With this in mind, the riders often chose the Iberian horse as their mount. In 1556, Thomas Blundeville of England commented "The horse of Spain is finely made, both head, body and legs, and very seemly to the eye and for his making lightness and swiftness withall, he is very much esteemed, and especially of noble men." In 1600, Salomon de la Broue, who would become instructor to the French king, stated, "Comparing the best horses, and considering which is most perfect, I would place the Spanish first." The appreciation these leading equestrian figures had for the Spanish horse was shared by many others of the time, including the Duke of New Castle and Pluvinel. Later, Francois de la Gueriniere furthered dressage as an art, riding Spanish horses and changing the saddle to allow for more use of weight aids and the development of our modern leg position. He also introduced the shoulder-in, helping the horse to collect and engage his hindquarters.

All Authors have always shown a preference for the Spanish horse, considering it the best of all horses for high school dressage, due to its agility, its resilience and its rhythm. 1733, Francois de la Gueriniere

It wasn't until the early 1800's that equestrian sport changed dramatically. The Iberian horse fell out of favor as the kings no longer wanted an upright and collected

mount, but rather sought a fast horse that would race and hunt over fences. The classical art of dressage as performed with the Iberian horse became obscure, except on the Iberian Peninsula and in some of military schools, where it can still be found today.



Dutch Warmblood mare showing rectangular conformation as well as many characteristics of the “Old Iberian Factor” including high set neck, sub-convex head, thick mane and tail, and strong, sloping croup.

The Present

Let us start from the 1800s, where the Iberian horses, being used to perform classical dressage including the airs above the ground, were replaced as the popular riding horse by more rectangular horses that raced and jumped. The Thoroughbred, the Trakehner, and the Hanoverian all are descendants of the Iberian horse. Guerinier promoted the horse of the Iberian Peninsula and because he felt they were the finest saddle horses, encouraged the breeding of them to improve local horses. Upon examination, many of today's breeds still show traits of the Iberian or what writer and enthusiast Sylvia Loch has referred to as the “Old Iberian Factor”. Short backs, strong quarters, high set necks, and an abundance of mane and tail are some of these common traits. The Hanoverian and Trakehner were both bred directly from Iberian horses crossed with native horses. These two breeds are the foundation for most of today's other warmblood breeds. Since the development of warmbloods as sporthorses they have been further refined with Thoroughbred, and in some cases, Arabian blood.

In the early 1900s, dressage was in a delicate position. The principles of classical dressage were becoming obscure and only some of the movements remained, such as piaffe, passage, and pirouette. At this point, the airs above the ground and other advanced movements were only found on the Iberian Peninsula and in Vienna. In order to save what was left of dressage, the FEI was founded with the goal to preserve what

dressage used to be. The most common dressage horse of the time was the German Warmblood, a rectangular horse, and he is what the FEI rules and parameters are written around. The dressage of the classical school, dressage for the collected and elevated Iberian horse, was no longer. Dressage was now designed for the forward moving rectangular horse. The movements that required the extreme collection that only comes naturally to the square horse, disappeared from the new dressage.

In the early part of the 1900s, dressage was still a military competition and the tests were not yet what we are familiar with today. The Olympic games included dressage tests where horses were asked to jump barrels that were being rolled towards them. There were obstacles and challenges that we are more likely to see in gymkhana events of present. It wasn't until the second half of the century that this changed.

In 1952, dressage became an open sport. It was now a civilian sport, not just a military competition, allowing women to compete, which, presently dominate the sport. Different levels were developed, moving down the scale from the advanced school to local levels, where horses are asked only to walk, trot, and canter, and need not be able to perform upper level movements. This is dressage for the rectangular horse, with competitions designed for all levels. In FEI or competition dressage, the horse is asked to hold his gaits for periods of time, minimally changing from extended to collected or vice versa. Today the best competition horse is good at everything, not necessarily great at any one thing. Most horses score an average of 60% on tests (which, if you recall from your high school math classes, this is barely a passing score). The Iberian horse, with its square conformation, is not favored for FEI dressage. The square horse has the ability to hold his gaits, but excels when you ask him to quickly change gaits from a halt to a gallop, back to piaffe, and then into a levade.

Because of their simplicity and clarity, the principles of the classical equestrian art are of value for any kind of riding. Alois Podhasky

The true art of classical dressage does not conform to any rulebook. Classical dressage training allows you to build on the individual strengths of each horse, allowing the horse to develop balance and straightness in his own time. It uses gymnastic exercises to improve on a horse's weaknesses and enhance their natural abilities, rather than looking for a horse that performs equally well at all tasks while not necessarily excelling at any one in particular. In the Spanish Riding School of Vienna, the Lipizzans horses are trained to perform the airs above the ground, but each individual horse is rarely asked to perform all of them. In training, a horse will show a stronger aptitude, for a certain air, and this will be the air that he is trained to perform. Seek the individual strength of each and bring out the best in the horse.

Today, there are people practicing classical dressage and not competing, but there are also those riding Iberian horses in competition and being very successful. The Spanish dressage team made a statement in the 1996 Olympic games in Atlanta, Georgia when Ignacio Rambla competed on the pure Spanish Andalusian stallion Evento, placing seventh. In 2002 at the World Equestrian Games in Jerez the team won the bronze medal with two Spanish Andalusians, a Lusitano, and one Warmblood. The team stepped up to a silver medal at the 2004 Olympic games in Athens.

The Future

Current competitions are geared towards the rectangular horse and his ability to move forward covering a lot of ground. Training for competitions is also geared towards moving the horse forward and keeping him horizontal to the ground, such that his hindquarters drive him forward (rather than upward) and onto the bit. Competition horses are never asked to lower their croup and lift their forehand to the extent that is required to perform the advanced exercises of the classical school, such as the levade. With these being the current standards, the square horse is not given the opportunity to show his greatest capacity in competition. On the other hand, more and more dressage trainers and enthusiasts, recognize and value the square horse for what they can give to the rectangular horse and its rider.



King Oberon OSF, a 5 year old Iberian Warmblood competing in dressage and eventing.

Today's breeders are infusing more Iberian blood back into the Thoroughbred and warmbloods to create a lighter, more sensitive, more rideable dressage mount. Warmbloods are often difficult to ride, especially for the aging rider. With big gaits, warmbloods often need to be lunged before their owners are comfortable to get on and ride. By adding the kind disposition, sensitivity and tremendous rideability of the Iberian to the warmblood you create the perfect partner: the Iberian Warmblood. The Iberian Warmblood is fluid and forward to ride with uphill movement and good bones. They are sensitive to the rider's aids and submissive to the rider's requests. These horses blend the best qualities of the square and rectangular horse while retaining the abilities for both classical and competition dressage. The training of the horse dictates which of his abilities is brought to light. While still rare, just over 10,000 purebred Andalusian and Lusitano horses are registered in the United States, their popularity is growing as is the popularity of adding Iberian blood to improve upon other breeds; de la Guerinier would be pleased! The number of partbred Andalusian and Lusitano horses is growing quickly with the number of registered partbreds in the United States already passing the 5000 mark.

The future will tell what will become of dressage, competitive and classical. And, the future will tell what will become of the Iberian horse. When you combine the two, only great things can be achieved!