

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.

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 Training

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. 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.



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

Problems and Solutions: The Gaits

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 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.



The hotblooded Iberian horse enjoys a change of scenery and different working environment.

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.

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.



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

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.

A tip for the rider: The Iberian has natural collection and difficulty extending. He should be schooled at the collected gaits, suppling and perfecting, before being asked to extend. When the Iberian is ready to start work at the extended trot, it is important to only take a few extended steps at a time until he has developed the balance needed to carry himself the length of the arena. At all times be careful that the horse does not carry too much weight on his forehead and become heavy in your hands.

The Main Idea

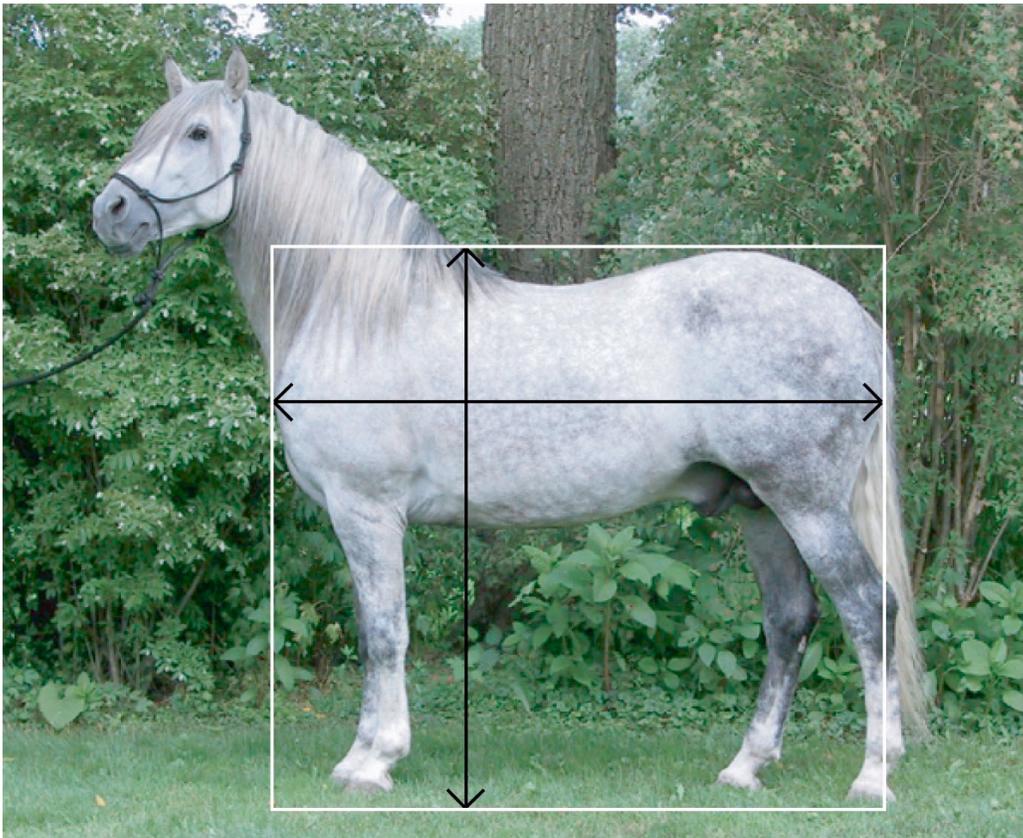
Classical dressage uses gymnastic training methods to improve upon the horse’s natural ability. The classical method incorporates many different exercises to build muscles and strengthen joints helping the horses to become better balanced and working towards the high school movements. These same principles 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!



The Conformation of the Horse

By Sarah Gately-Wilson

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.



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.

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.

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.

Examples of the rectangular horse include most of today's sporthorses and were originally bred from Iberian blood. The Thoroughbred, the Trakehner, and the Hanoverian all are descendants of the Iberian horse. Gueriniere 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.



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.