

Iberian Horses in Competition Dressage

By Sarah Gately-Wilson

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 into play. 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.

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

It is important that the Iberian horse aimed at competition dressage always be ridden forward. This must start at the beginning of his training. 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!

Overall, if the Iberian is taught a proper walk by a trainer with patience and a calm quiet demeanor, the result is a lovely, even, cadenced, four beated gait with lift and forward movement. 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. 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. 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!