



TRAINING REFLECTIONS WITH MANOLO MENDEZ - PART 1

By Caroline Larrouilh

IN MARCH OF 2015, WE
HOSTED A PAINTED
HORSE DEMONSTRATION
AND LECTURE AT
EQUESTRIAN LA MANCHA.
EQUINOLOGY'S OWNER,
DEBRANNE PATTILLO
PAINTED WOLFEMEN
STALLION, CLINT
EASTWOOD FOR THE
DEMONSTRATION.



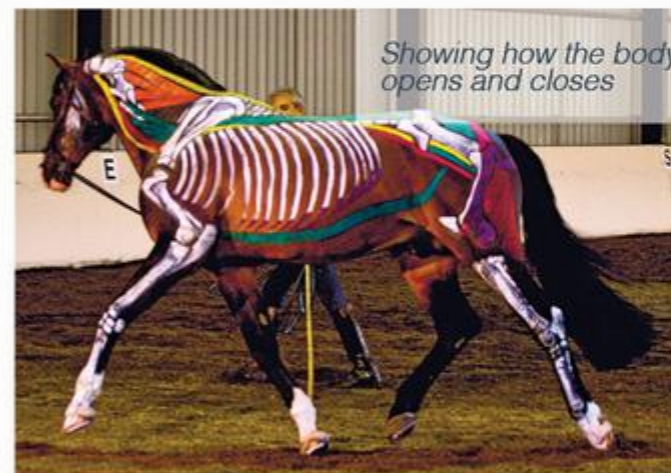


“Fixed positions are for inanimate matter, bodies need to move!”

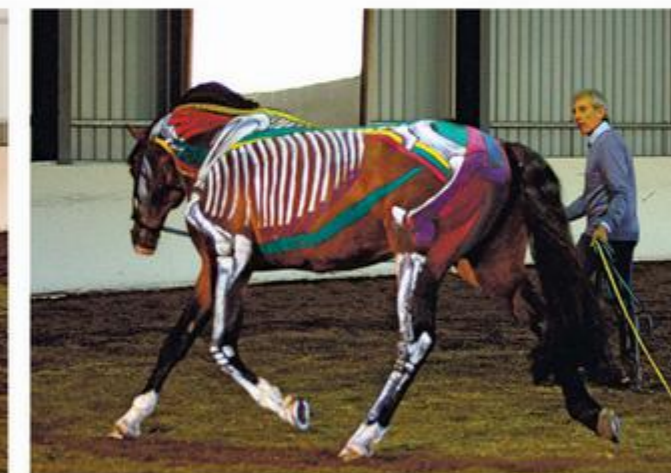
Debranne spent five painstaking hours palpating bony landmarks and muscle margins in order to create an accurate portrayal of Clint’s true skeleton and muscles. He ate, drank, slept, took walks and consumed many carrots and licorice sticks during the entire process. For this particular Painted Horse, Debranne focused on the muscles of collection and locomotion including the nuchal ligament, the supraspinous ligament, the dorsal portion of the sacro-sciatic ligament, parts of the cervical spine (four of seven vertebrae) the lamellar portion of the nuchal ligament, a portion of the spinalis, the long back muscle, the longus colli and scalenus muscles, the iliopsoas complex and rectus abdominis as well as the hamstrings including the semitendinosus into the Achilles tendon. In essence, Debranne painted the topline and underline of the horse. The images offer a fascinating insight into the inner mechanics of horses. Horses’ bodies breathe, expand, contract, extend, flex, stretch, collect

and they release. Fixed headsets, fixed postures and fixed gaits for long or even short stretches of time do not build fitness, instead they build stiffness.

Looking at the photos you can see the horse’s ribcage contract on the inside and expand on the outside as it turns. You can see how much the muscles change depending on whether the horse is moving in a forward, down and out posture or in a more gathered posture or is collected. From all of this, we learn that it is essential the horse be trained elastically. When the horse collects, his topline has to lengthen. The network of muscles that run from his poll, down the neck, over the back and croup and down the hamstrings to the hocks has to elongate to accommodate a new posture. Collection requires a longer neck to offset flexed hind limbs. A good visual indicator of correct collection is the horse’s neck appearing to lengthen as its body shortens due to the increasing flexion of its back and hind joints.



Showing how the body opens and closes



These images show how the ribcage opens to different degrees in a turn and depending on the horse’s stride. Each stride has variation in how the ribcage opens/closes. Each rib was painted to represent an actual rib. While there is skin movement you can still see clearly how the body opens and closes.



‘I ride evenly in two reins. When the horse is blocked ever so slightly on one rein, it restricts the range of motion of the shoulder on that side.’

Elasticity is so important and exemplifies the successful training of a ‘happy dressage athlete’: *“Supple, Loose and Flexible”*. This physical condition defines the happy athlete as: Calm, Keen, Attentive and Confident - four mental states that are conducive to looseness, suppleness and flexibility rather than stiffness and tension.

As a horse develops, he is able to change posture, his neck and body are able to shorten, extend, lower or rise to help him/her find their equilibrium and travel in balance.

Fixed positions are for inanimate matter, bodies need to move! As we can observe in the photos, the horse’s spine and his joints are constantly solicited by the horse’s muscles.

Bones do not make any decisions: muscles tell them what to do; this is why developing an even muscular mass is so important to straightness and balance. The horse’s body (*like our own*) is alive. Muscles, tendons, ligaments, skin, eyes, ears, lips, hooves, bones, everything is flesh, is fascia, everything is alive, constantly adjusting to movement, load, pressure, direction and thus having to be elastic, to absorb, give and stretch.

As importantly, the mind of the horse is receiving and telegraphing signals to its body constantly, based on the data it receives about its environment but also based on its emotional state which impacts its tonus. We do not want to block this physical and mental



This shows what happens when collection is introduced. As the horse's haunches lower and the base of the neck rises, the whole shape of the horse's body changes including its ribcage, which appears to become shorter and fuller as it expands out. This is why not blocking the spine with restricting contact and not blocking the horse's breathing with a tight girth is so important. The body expands and contracts not only from end to end, but side to side as well as up and down.

"With each good ride, the rider is training the horse to become more trusting and confident."

process. To create healthy and quality collection, we want our horse's balance to spring from within. We do not want to take over their bodies and take over their thinking. We want to guide and shape, not create straight jackets. We want to learn to work WITH the horse rather than try to dominate all its systems: his brain, his central nervous system, his heart, his lungs, his muscles, his bones, tendons and ligaments. This is true of a young horse and of any horse as it progresses up in its training.

LENGTHEN: In a word, fixity is the enemy of suppleness. To develop a horse capable of collecting we must first develop a fit, supple, loose, flexible horse capable of lengthening and extending. Therefore, we want to create as many opportunities inside the training as we can for the horse's body to contract and expand, gather and lengthen, to extend and collect.

In addition, as each horse has more than just one working, lengthened, medium, collected and extended walk, trot and canter,

we should work with all of these gaits to develop our horse's fitness and balance. As long as we assist the horse in finding his best rhythm and balance in each expression of walk, trot and canter, each is valuable in developing the horse's body.

BIOGRAPHY: Manolo Mendez was the first Head Rider, and one of six founding members of the Royal Andalusian School of Equestrian Art. Based in Jerez, Spain, the school is one of the four classical schools which also include the Cadre Noir in Saumur, the Spanish Riding School in Vienna and the Portuguese School of Equestrian Art in Lisbon. A master horseman with over forty five years of experience spanning classical dressage, doma vaquera and jumping, Manolo is dedicated to what he calls "Training for Wellness™", a soft, sympathetic and thorough training method which prepares horses physically and psychologically for each stage of training from training to Grand Prix and Haute Ecole. 🐾

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