

TRAINING REFLECTIONS WITH MANOLO MENDEZ

PART TWO

By Caroline Larrouilh

WHEN WE SPEAK OF TRAINING USING VARIATIONS OF GAITS INSIDE GAITS, IT IS ALWAYS WITH THE UNDERSTANDING THAT IT SHOULD BE DONE WITH THE DEGREE OF COLLECTION OR EXTENSION APPROPRIATE TO THE STAGE OF TRAINING AND PHYSICAL FITNESS OF THE HORSE.



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Different postures inside any one gait and different degrees of impulsion inside a lesson allows the horse's body to move its every joint, muscle, tendon and ligament without developing any kind of fixed musculoskeletal pattern. This means we are not training our horses to be stiff and crooked, but supple and straight.

We have to find the right tempo for our horse: too much energy/activity runs the horse down and damages its body. Not enough energy/activity causes the horse to become careless and indifferent and for its body to become disconnected.

Learning to recognize that a horse has a wide range of gaits that are healthy and desirable for training purposes, besides 'show gaits' or 'collected gaits', and learning to appreciate all of them and their role in helping build the horse's fitness and willingness, is one of the most important principles of

training for wellness.

So remember to vary the gaits, and the gaits within the gaits, and to vary the level of activity you ask of your horse. It is this gymnastic training that keeps the body healthy and makes collection without injury possible. In my experience, training in this manner teaches the horse that his rider is working together with him in true partnership and is aware of, and responsive to his physical and mental state. With each good ride, the rider is training the horse to become more trusting and confident. The horse can be confident that when the rider is asking for more effort, more collection or extension, more impulsion or expression, he won't be forcing him into a strict regime of frame, frame, frame and demanding the same high degree of difficulty for an entire training session.

The horse knows that when he

works in collection and extension that there will be pauses and varied postures and degrees of impulsion ahead. When a horse learns that the work is fair and the rider is attuned to its physical and mental wellbeing, it frees him from the anxiety of anticipating relentless pressure and demands in his training sessions. With his mind at peace, the horse is able to focus more fully on the rider and learn to listen to his aids.

As the horse becomes more attuned to the rider and more aware and responsive to the rider's increasingly refined aids, as its fitness develops, it is able to perform increasingly more refined work, in growing degrees of collection, without stress or tension. This enriches the relationship and partnership between both and can help transform a timid horse into a bold and willing one and a resistant horse into a calm, keen and attentive one.

I USE THE FOLLOWING SIMPLE PRINCIPLES WHEN TRAINING TO DEVELOP COLLECTION:

1. To allow the natural movement and oscillation of the horse's spine to take place, I follow the horse's neck and head movement in walk and canter. In trot, I keep my hands neutral but never fixed. Riding in such a manner ensures I do not block the horse.

2. When turning, I am very conscious of the change in the horse's ribcage and spinal alignment. I swivel my torso so that my shoulders mirror the shoulders of the horse.

This ensures I am not blocking the outside rein, instantly making the horse stiff by blocking its spine. As you can see in the photos, the ribcage opens and closes a little bit like an accordion when the horse is on a curved line. Blocking the outside rein creates tightness in the muscles that link the ribs

to each other (the intercostals). After a period of time, the horse becomes trapped in a corset of the rider's making. This makes suppleness an unlikely outcome of training.

3. 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. This in turn restricts the engagement of the diagonal pair's hind leg. This in turn makes the horse crooked. Riding evenly in two reins is absolutely essential to the development of an even, straight and balanced horse.

4. The horse's noseband, flash and girth must not be tight. Every time we shut down a joint, we impact every joint in the body. Thus, closing down the horse's TMJ impacts the entire spinal

chain. Because the spine dictates what the legs do, this affects the horse's movement. A blocked back leads to what is called a leg mover which is extremely undesirable in a sport which lists gait purity as its first requirement. Where the girth is concerned, when too tight, it blocks the horse's breathing but also its ability to fully raise its ribcage between its shoulders and let the withers rise which is a necessity when collecting a horse.

Simply by being aware and respecting the need for the horse's body to move in an elastic, fluid manner, varying the gaits and posture to avoid fixity and striving to develop the best rhythm and tempo for our individual horse, we are developing an athlete that will in time be able to offer collection without stressing either its mind or its 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. For more information and more articles visit:



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