

MANOLO MENDEZ DRESSAGE

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Manolo Mendez Clinic report – April 20-21, 2009 – Las Vegas

By Monica Whitmer

Rather than a horse-by-horse review, I am going to instead cover general concepts that tend to pop up again and again when Manolo teaches. Because he was working with a whole crew of students who had never ridden with him before, some basic ideas were repeated, often with a different analogy that gave a slightly different nuance to the concept.

Blue Ribbon Stables is a hunter Jumper barn, so the horses were generally not dressage trained – but Manolo's work is just pure good horsemanship, and applies to any style of riding. Which is how dressage is supposed to be, up until 3rd-4th level.

Understanding Horses

One basic concept is understanding the mind of the horse.

The first horse I saw Manolo work with was a big black horse that had been ridden first but by the time I got there, was being worked in-hand. Manolo indicated the horse was mentally blocked, which caused him to also be physically blocked. Getting this horse to change, and open up a little could not be forced. The horse was initially not at all interested in Manolo. So, he did some in-hand work to get the horse to try and use his body in a different manner and maybe release the physical blockage in its neck.

Apparently, this rider had run the horse in the round pen before riding it, and Manolo said that in his opinion, "Free lunging is like putting a child in a room with a few books and shutting the door, and expecting the kid to teach himself how to read!" A free lunging horse will just reinforce his bad habits of movement, rather than learn a better way to carry himself.

Manolo prefers a horse be worked in hand with a combination of lunging to encourage the horse to use his body correctly – emphasizing calmness, softness and correct flexion. He also uses this time to examine what muscles seem restricted, what's working and what areas are not being used and according to what he perceives then this is the area that will get the most attention.

Then once that is clear and the horse is moving with calmness and freedom of body then he will begin to ride. There will be times he will use more in hand than ridden for a horse on that particular day. It always depends on how the horse comes in for the training session. The horse tells him what is needed most. He also feels very strongly that horses need to be turned out daily so they don't just stand around in their stalls all day, getting stiff. . Horses need movement to get blood pumping to their feet and to stretch their whole bodies. Naturally a horse kept in turn out is not going to be as high and then doesn't need to be run to be rideable.

Another point Manolo made over and over was that you have to keep things simple for the horse. Break the task down to something easy. For example, one rider turned a circle that was too tight for the horse to do in balance. Manolo said that doing the larger simpler

circle was like starting a young jumping horse over cross rails. You give the horse the idea, and gradually raise the fence. If the horse has difficulty with the new height, you go back down to lower jumps. And you don't always jump the big fences; you alternate between schooling low jumps and then doing the larger jumps to develop the horse's confidence and musculature.

Similarly, with circles, you start a young horse with large easy circles, then occasionally challenge them with something a little smaller, and FEEL if the horse can manage that size comfortably. If so, you can do that size more often. If it is still a strain, you go back to focusing on the larger, easier bending. The discs between the vertebrae need time to develop sufficient elasticity to permit a tighter bend. A young horse or one who has not been working correctly literally cannot bend in a 10 meter circle without pain.

Working with what the horse can manage was really demonstrated when Manolo worked with Lily, a 3 yr old WB filly who had not yet been started under saddle. Apparently, on Monday morning, in a session I didn't see, Lily really challenged him. She had several temper tantrums and tried to get out of accepting his influence. But on the 2nd day, she was basically calm and contrite. He did opt to work with her in the round pen, so there was less area for her to attempt to bolt away. He said that distraction was not good for this mare at this time and that contrary to the traditional wisdom that you change direction on the lunge very frequently, he would rather see a young horse work in one direction until the horse has shown some understanding. THEN you can reverse and get the same comprehension in the other direction. So a horse might have to work for 10 minutes going the same way before being allowed to reverse. Keep in mind with a young horse and training you have to be prepared to compromise such as to keep the training sessions short, maybe only 15 minutes total. It is not meant to be a challenge for young horse for it is purely a learning stage of their hopefully long, happy life

You must give the horse enough time working on the same problem so that he can resolve it, and not become confused.

In asking this mare to canter, Manolo kept increasing her trot – a small pressure, and when she picked up speed, even though she didn't change gaits, he rewarded her by easing the pressure for a few seconds. Once again here we see compromise from the trainer. Then, he would ask her to speed up even a little more. It took easily 6-8 asks. Each time, Lily trotted a little faster, and eventually she just slipped into canter. If she had gotten a wrong lead, Manolo said he would have just kept her going for about 5 laps, then he would have brought her back to trot, for 2 laps, then asked for the canter again. Because the outside lead is difficult to maintain, the horse would most likely choose to pick up the easy correct lead the second time.

Manolo said that with a mare like this one, you need to keep her enthusiasm up, not drill her and make it boring or hard or she would become very difficult, as she is a super smart mare. At the end of the session, he took her on a brief "walk about" and he highly recommended that the owner continue doing that, to get her used to just seeing the sights, and to keep things interesting.

Similarly, a DWB gelding who had been an over used lesson horse before his owner bought him, was not 'corrected' when he got a wrong lead – instead the rider was encouraged to simply change direction to whatever lead he offered. Another simple compromise from the trainer. This horse was very sour and not very willing to go forward

so, you would not want to correct him for trying to canter even if it was the wrong lead. Manolo suspected that this wise old horse KNEW that if he got the wrong lead, the rider would stop him, and that worked for him. So, by ignoring the wrong lead, and insisting on keeping the canter, you keep from having a fight, you don't accidentally reward the bad lead, and you get the unwilling horse working. You would do the same thing with a young horse just learning to canter. If you get a wrong lead, just ride across the diagonal and change direction to match the lead offered.

In a later riding session, with a mare used for eventing, Manolo expounded on the unique qualities of mares. He said that mares remember if they have been treated roughly. A stallion can get a kick in the ribs and just gets over it and go on. A mare is very protective of her belly because of her need to carry a foal during pregnancy. So, if you kick her with spurs, it is an affront that she will carry a grudge about. He said stallions (and geldings) are able to tune injury out - such that in the wild, two stallions can fight and fight and really hurt each other. Mares rarely fight to the death.

Manolo strives to have riders develop a very fair relationship with their horses. He had one rider working on simple transitions – halt, walk 10 steps, halt again. He wanted the rider to act WITH the horse. When moving into walk, he said apply the legs gently, but also slightly give with the hands other wise the horse has no way (room) to push with the hind leg and really step under. In going from walk to halt (or any downward transitions), he said WARN the horse that he is going to need to stop his momentum. To do that smoothly, or any transition smoothly the horse needs time to PREPARE HIS BODY. If you always stop abruptly, it is like a car driver always slamming on the brakes – the stops are rough and unsettling. Eventually the brakes wear out, and then you can't stop at all. Same with the horse.

The concept of keeping the horse calm and happy by asking for small changes clearly resonated though every session. When a rider changed rein across the diagonal, they were instructed to ride to the 2nd letter rather than FXH, riders were asked to go from F to S, or instead of KXM, to go from K to R. This allowed the horses more TIME TO PREPARE for the new bend and flexion before going through the corner. Likewise, in downward transitions from canter, the young horse should be kept moving forward in an active trot for a full 20 meter circle or half the way around the arena, so the horse doesn't learn to drop out of the trot right after the downward transition.

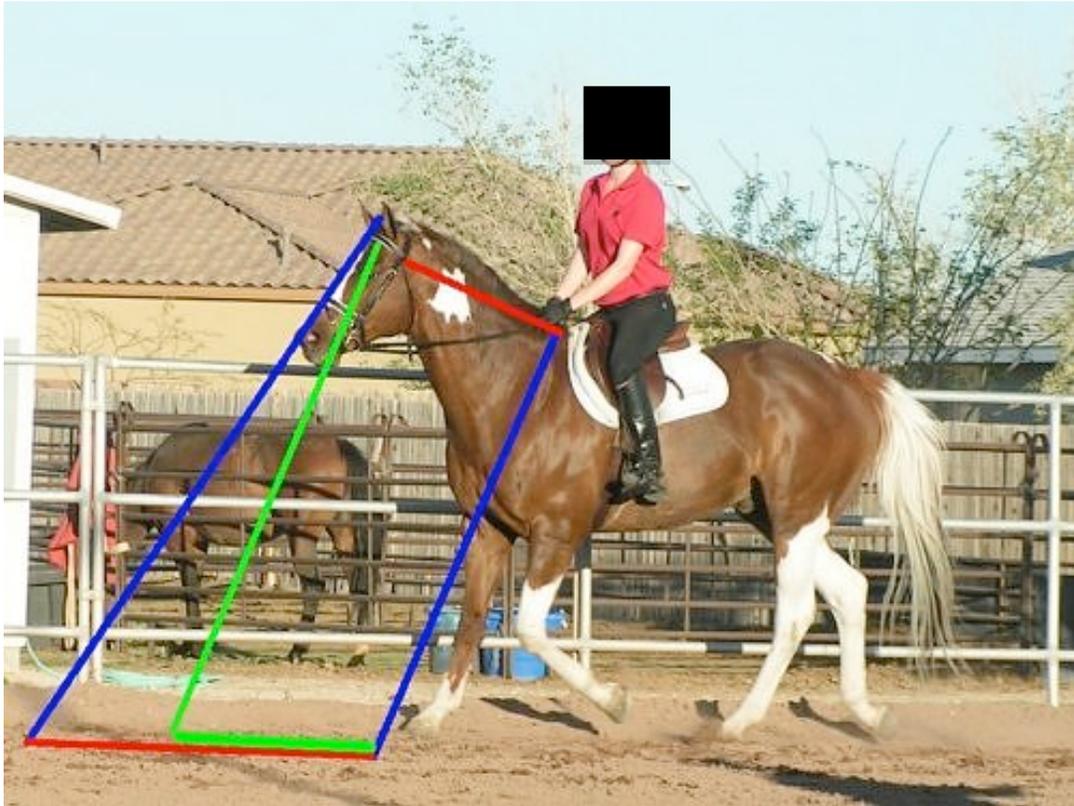
Developing the horse's body with the correct posture

Manolo's training is all about developing the horse's body. He looks at the horse's body, to determine where the muscles need to strengthen. Then you can predict how the horse will look after 6-12 months of good correct work. The body, posture and muscles tell you how the horse has been schooled.

Manolo feels that for basic work – gymnasticizing at every level - there is an ideal place for the horse to carry his head and neck. It is not an exact spot, but a range. The horse's eye should be level with the point of the hip as the high point, and the stifle as the low point. Anywhere in that range is acceptable for the correct development of the horse. Likewise, the horse should carry his face stretched slightly out.



If you draw a line down the front of the face to the ground, and then draw a line down the slope of the shoulder to the ground, (diagramed in blue) the distance between these two points should be the same length as the horse's neck. (shown in red).



If the distance between the two points is longer than the length of the horse's neck, the horse is 'too open' and will wind up with a hollow back and his hind legs will work out behind him.



If the distance between the two points is shorter than the length of the neck then the horse's head will be curled in, the nose behind the vertical, and the neck will have to cramp up to try and match and this will compromise development of the neck muscles as well as stiffen the horse through the poll and jaw. In this photo the green lines represent the ideal posture where this horse should be carrying his head. But on this day, this was about the best this horse could offer Manolo.

Manolo vehemently opposes riding behind the vertical at any moment because it damages muscles, tendons and ligaments in the horse's body, neck, hindquarters and fore and hind limbs.

A hollow horse will have his back swayed downward, and the saddle will sit below the withers, the tail will be carried well above the point of the hip bone – showing that the pelvis is tipped out and back. It is NOT conformation; it is how the horse learns to carry himself with incorrect training. Manolo can touch a horse in such a way that the horse tucks his butt under, and completely changes his topline. It doesn't last, but it clearly shows that the hollow back and backwards pelvis are not inborn in the horse (except for rare exceptions), and can be improved through correct training when riding.

As much as there is an ideal frame for a horse to work in that develops the body, there is also an ideal tempo and energy for each gait.

Working with a lovely gray Mecklenburg gelding Manolo said if the horse works too slow, he leaves his outside hind leg straight and behind him. If he goes more forward, the legs get more united and there is a better equal distribution of bend in the joints of the hip, stifle and hock. But if you get too fast or strong, the horse begins to just rush.



This is a photo of the Mecklinburg at the start of the first day -he is disengaged behind, with his hind legs working out behind him. He has a nice open frame, and is calm, but not connected or 'working'.



This is the same horse towards the end of the second day. You can see there is a connection now between horse and rider, and between the hind end and the front end. The horse is starting to lift up in front and engage behind. Manolo is assisting the horse by having the bamboo pole in front of him like a moving cavaletti.

One really lovely horse in the clinic was a Donnerhall grand daughter who was stiff in the left shoulder. She had arrived from Germany with severe thrush and her heels were still not supporting her well. Manolo wanted her trot to be at the speed that allowed her to travel evenly. He said that later, as she got healthier feet, the rider could ask for more. Because of the tenderness, she wanted to brace her neck up, and her rider was instructed to gently ask her to lower her neck and then ask her to push her nose out. This was done over time and never forced. We have to be prepared to work within a horse's physical limitations in order for the horse to get stronger.

Most of the horses seen at this clinic needed to carry their necks lower to open the withers. The older DWB gelding really needed to learn how to move his body. When he raised his neck, it closed the vertebrae, causing tension and pain and leading to a cranky horse. Manolo suspected arthritic changes in his neck and withers. But lower is not always better, most horses cannot carry a very long stretched frame until they have had time to develop the balance and muscles to support this posture. In that case, you find the best the horse can do at the time, and are ready to reward any effort to do more as time goes by.

Interestingly, with this group of horses, we didn't have many that over flexed the way you commonly see dressage horses curl up. One showed a bit of a tendency to do it in halt, and the rider was instructed to push her hands forward, give a little flick of the reins and a verbal correction of "Shhtttt". Manolo did comment that if ridden incorrectly a horse with a large jaw that curls will break at C-3, but a small-jawed horse that curls will break at C-2.

The ideal posture is not a static one, however. The eventing mare was very tight throughout her body, and Manolo advised that she needed to work in all different postures, long and low trot, then canter, then shoulder in. Lots of releases and many changes of tasks, so there isn't a constant pressure. Manolo does not believe in 'drilling' any horse on any task. Three times is enough to see if the horse understands and improves. If he does, well, move on; if he doesn't then he isn't ready, so move on!

The eventing mare also demonstrated another point I have heard Manolo make before – that if a horse is ridden too short in the neck and strains against the bit too much, they will cut off the blood flow to the tongue, making it numb, and so the bit literally stops working. You can see the tongue and gums turn blue colored, showing the lack of blood flow. Soon, the tongue is 'asleep' like if you sit on your own leg, and then can't feel it when you get up. An over flexed horse has less blood/oxygen flowing to the brain, and face, so the eyes get red and the horse's vision may become affected and will/can show signs of distress. Sometimes, the hollows above the eyes start filling and pumping rapidly. The horse is more likely to spook, and once spooked, he won't stop because he can't really feel the pressure of the bit because his tongue is numb. Manolo said you would see it happen sometimes with rough handed vaqueros in Spain – and the horses would run until pure exhaustion would stop them. So you don't want to hang on a horse's face, or their tongue will numb. And you don't want a horse so tense that he shuts off blood flow to his brain. This seems to be a possible explanation for a few international incidents with advanced dressage horses.

The Geometry of Training

Manolo's system for developing the horse's body involves very simple patterns.

As soon as a horse has found his "working posture and tempo" Manolo asks the rider to do a very shallow loop. For example leaving the rail a little after F, with the widest part of the loop just 3 meters off the rail at B and returning to the rail before M.

This simple exercise creates flexibility in the spine, and allows the rider to give the horse a break from constantly bending in one direction without actually reversing direction. It also permits the rider to ride a bend that is even more open than a 20 meter circle would require.

As the horse's ability increases, the loop can be made deeper – first going to a 5 meter loop, then a 10 meter deep loop and then 15 and eventually 20 meter loop, which develops into the 3 loop serpentine. At the 15 meter width, the rider can even add in a circle to increase flexibility, and ensure that the horse really changes his bend for the center loop.

The shallow loop does need to be accurately ridden. ; The loop needs to be widest at the center of the ring, so the rider doesn't run into the far corner of the arena finishing the figure and blocking the horse forward.

It is important that the rider understand where the change of bend occurs – not at the apex of the curve, but instead half way between leaving the rail and the widest part of the curve – which should be aligned between B and E. The change in the bend needs to be ridden smoothly, with a gently transfer of the hand position – like steering a wheelbarrow around a curved path.

This simple figure is also done at the canter to develop the counter canter. The rider needs to learn how to ride the pattern accurately at the trot so when the complexity of the canter is added in, the figure is assisting the horse with correct flexion and bend, not trapping him.

This is one area where Manolo is very different from other dressage trainers. He tells riders to change the flexion to match the path of the curve in the counter canter. He feels that when riders struggle to keep the flexion matching the bend of the canter, the riders lose control of the quarters and force the horse to travel crooked.

One of the riders really struggled with the counter canter, she was afraid that if she changed flexion, her jumper would change leads. But when she carefully released the rein on the inside of the bend, permitting the horse to actually turn with the counter canter, the horse was noticeably more balanced. It is very subtle when done right, not a significant flexion in the new direction, mostly an avoidance of pulling the inside rein. And it clearly works.

Other counter canter exercises involved riding a 12 meter half circle, returning to the track and riding the short end of the ring like a large half circle – No corners in training counter canter – then back across the diagonal to return to true canter. The counter canter work created the beginnings of collection, rebalancing the horse, so that when he returned to true canter, he would noticeably relax and have a better quality canter. This is how you bring the horse up from the working frame that is established in the warm up. Not shortening the

reins and pulling the horse together, but allowing the exercises to create the more advanced frame.

The other trademark pattern that Manolo has horses work on as soon as they are working with some balance is the shoulder in on a diagonal, or the Candy Cane exercise as some call it.

Manolo also calls it a Shoulder in (moving) out. If you are tracking right, you would ride a 15 meter (approximately) half circle right at H and then just before you complete the half circle, when the shoulders are pointed towards B, you ride a shoulder in on that diagonal line. It might SEEM like a leg yield but the main difference is that the horse is bent, not straight, the shoulders are leading, and the legs are crossing on 3 tracks. The leg yield is on 4 tracks and in Manolo's opinion 4 tracks disconnects the body. Manolo is emphatic that Leg Yield is 'Poison' for horses.

His opinion is that the horse cannot really cross the hind legs without hitting himself, unless he rotates his pelvis backwards to make room – this then encourages a hollow back which is the antithesis of what he wants to develop in a young horse. So shoulder in is better as a first lateral exercise. You could try to just teach shoulder in along the rail, but then the young horse runs a risk of hitting the rails, and he is drawn to the rail, so you are fighting his natural tendencies. By riding the Candy Cane, you cash in on the horse's desire to get to the rail, since he already wants to move in that direction, you get to simply shape how he moves there. So with a very green or stiff horse, you might even start with an 18 meter circle, so you do just a few simple steps of the Shoulder in moving out.

As the horse understands the exercise, and develops his muscles, you can do a 12 meter half circle, and eventually even a 10 meter half circle.

It is important to ride this pattern correctly. You do not ride the complete half circle, because then you would break the line of travel. You come out of it early, so the horse can move on one steady bend. It is also important that the riders sit towards the line of travel. Too often a rider over works the inside leg and gets their body folded with their shoulders leaning away from where they want the horse to go. It is also important that the inside leg be applied AT the girth. If the leg is placed further back, you move the hind quarters.

Some horses already naturally run quicker in the back, so letting the leg slip back only worsens that. The hands lead the motion. For a shoulder in traveling to the left, as in the example above- the hands shift so that the right hand is near the withers, the right leg is close to the girth, and the riders body weight is to the left. As you finish the movement the rider should soften their hands and look for the horse to offer to stretch down and out – opening the topline as you come onto a straight line making sure your hands are even and looking straight ahead. You do not want to work at too steep an angle or the horse will lock up. Manolo said the shoulder in moving out is like breaking ground with a grader, it breaks the ground at an angle.

Manolo doesn't spend a lot of time on rider equitation, not unless they are of a higher level. He believes that to constantly correct a novice rider makes them over concentrate on what their posture is doing and they stiffen up and transfer this to the green horse. He believes that getting the horse right requires the rider to ride right, but he does make a point that riders must develop a following hand in the walk and canter, and a steady hand in the trot. If the rider doesn't follow the movement of the neck in walk and canter, the

horse will be unwilling to stretch. One rider was seen sawing a bit in an effort to get her horse's head down. He held the reins and duplicated the movement, and she admitted it was 'annoying'. Manolo said the correct contact is like ballroom dancing. You don't want to open your hands and drop the feel, but you also don't want to squeeze so tight that everything is stiff. If a rider can develop a good following hand, then the horse will trust the contact. If the horse learns to follow the rider's hands then if he gets crooked, the rider can literally PUSH the neck out to straighten. It is like pulling the front of the horse forward to make it straight, like pulling on a string to draw it straight, instead of trying to push bits and parts here and there.

Several riders had very stiff elbows. The too straight arm meant that their hands posted with their bodies in trot. Manolo demonstrated the value of a bent elbow by holding a whip in his hands pointing it towards the ground, just a couple of inches above the dirt with the arms held straight. As he mimicked a posting movement, the whip would hit the ground then lift, and then tap the ground again. Then for comparison, he slightly bent his arms and let the elbows fold and open as he posted. The whip stayed poised and steady. It was a graphic demonstration of how hard it is on the horse's mouth when a rider straightens and stiffens their elbows. He also helped one rider with piano hands create more softness in her wrists with knuckles facing each other to create shock absorbers. She immediately felt that it was more comfortable.

One of the most enjoyable parts of this clinic was getting to watch Manolo ride two different horses. One was a 6 yr old Zangersheib (?) gelding who is for sale. Manolo rode the horse for part of the session to give the rider an evaluation of the horse's ability. He pushed the horse into a very forward trot, and even rode on the buckle to give the horse confidence to really move out and look for a new balance. He also did the shoulder in moving out exercise to see how supple the horse could become. Over all, he felt the horse's work had been forced and he was confused and needed help. But that he was quite talented and physically capable.

The other was a show jumper who suffered a serious injury to a hind leg 4 years ago, and took over a year to recover. This horse showed stiffness in that left hind leg. Manolo's work started very slowly: walk with shoulder in, little bits of trot and then eventually canter to supple the whole horse. He rode this horse slightly over tempo to try and get the horse to change himself. He could not work the horse as long and low as he would have liked, because that would have dumped this horse onto his forehead. You have to accept the best the horse can offer that day. All the work was interspersed with periods of walk or even just standing still. He had worked the horse in hand the day before, and felt the horse was very traumatized and afraid. So, with this horse, it would be better to ride him to resolve his physical issues rather than do work in hand. He did leave the owner with homework to teach the horse to rein back nicely. The horse needs to learn to step backwards correctly, lifting his hind feet, as this will help getting the left hind more supple.

Overall, as always, I really benefited from auditing Manolo Mendez. This time, it was more about picking up details than learning the broad basics. But still, I got a fuller understanding of how the shoulder in moving out exercise is much more beneficial than leg yield, and how important it is to work within each horse's limitation, always looking to see if they can do a little more, but never violating their trust.

Small changes can make huge differences over time – and every step correctly ridden brings the horse one step closer to developing better muscles.