



Manolo Mendez Dressage

Feel, Technique and Compromise: The Foundation for any and all Training.

A conversation with Manolo Mendez, Specialist of in-hand and Classical Equitation

How important is technique combined with feel to training?

Many trainers and riders believe that the artistry of training is all in the technique. And while there can be no true artistry without technique, technique alone is not, and never can be, true artistry in itself. Training a horse well is a marriage of feel and technique, they must blend together. If you make a good marriage, the training will be easy.

Technique is experimenting with the feedback you get from the horse: what you feel. Sometimes that feedback is good, sometimes not so good. Technique is how you use that feedback to get a better result on any given day. You have to learn when and how much technique to use at any time. That comes back to feel.

For example, we ask the horse to trot and it is nice, so we accept that. But if we ask for more and the horse says: “That’s too much” and we insist – we force – the horse will

resist in one way or another. Going too slowly can make a horse stiff. But going too fast will make a horse stiff, as well. We have to feel what the happy medium is for each horse.

Suppose we want to join two pieces of wood. Wood like the body of the horse is a living matter, it breathes, it dries up, it swells and it must be treated thoughtfully. To join our two pieces of wood we need glue. But how much glue? And what will be the best way to apply the glue to get the best results? To get those two pieces of wood joined just right, we must use good glue, just the right amount of it, and we must apply it with care so that we join the pieces evenly, straight, not crooked, so that they are solid and resist the test of time without needing repairs.

I believe it helps to ride with a wide, open mind so your senses are alive and are well and truly receptive to everything you are experiencing. You become tuned in, and then you can freely gage what feels good, bad or mediocre. You can begin to use the right amount of technique to make it better.

“Now, I feel this. Now, I use technique to not lose that feel so as to make the horse go better.”

If you like, timing is feel and technique combined and this results in the artistry.

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It is said about horse training that good hands are born, not made. Is it the same with feel?

No. While some people are born with a greater capacity than others to interpret information from their senses, feel can still be developed. Just as the horse can improve through training that opens his mind so that he is happy to give and work, so can a rider improve through opening their mind to feel.

It is akin to learning about good wine. The more you practice, the more you taste different wines, the more sophisticated your palate becomes.

How do you tell if a melon is ripe for picking? You use all your senses. Sight, smell, touch, taste, hearing. A raw melon is green and has baby hair on the top. The skin looks and feels young, and when you tap it, it makes a sound like dry timber. And of course if you opened it and tasted the flesh you would know straight away that it was unripe.

You do not have to be born with a gift for telling whether a melon is ripe or not. Even a city person will figure it out after a few tries. At first they will need to analyze the information they are getting from all their senses. But very

soon they will not need to think about it, they will just know.

It is the same with horses. You develop a sense for how 'ripe' a horse is by using your senses. The more you do it, the more you get it.

A lot of our feel can also come from what we sense just by looking at a horse, by our general knowledge and common sense. We can make an accurate guess as to how a horse feels by looking into his eyes, touching his skin, listening to his breathing, feeling his muscles. We may look at his bridle and see that the bit is sitting too high or low. Or perhaps when we are riding we may feel that he is uncomfortable with the bit, so we can look for the reason and eliminate the discomfort. It is common sense that if the girth is too tight the horse will not feel comfortable and therefore not be able to give us his best because he will be focused on his discomfort. He will be unable to raise his back and use his entire body as well as he would if he was comfortable.

We must also take into account what we are feeling – or not feeling – in our own bodies. Some people are crooked in their posture but they do not know it. They have been this way all their lives and what is crooked feels normal to them. Sometimes the crookedness is very small, a light tilt of the

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head, one shoulder a smidge back, a hand that does not give as well as the other and more. This will eventually make the horse crooked, too. If a horse feels crooked we must learn to recognize if that is coming from crookedness in our own bodies. We must work to correct our alignment and posture and learn to feel a new 'normal' that is as straight and even as we ask the horse's body to be.

It is the rider's responsibility to learn to feel as the horse can only go as well as his rider.

Some trainers use a scale of 1-10 to measure how much technique is required to get the right result. How do you measure feel?

Like technique, the amount of feel a person uses in training a horse can be gaged on a scale of 1-10, where 1 is 'rough cut' and 10 is 'fine'. One person may employ feel at a 3, another may use it at an 8. The person with a 3 is probably going to do more damage to their horse than the person with an 8. But this is unavoidable until the 3 person learns, through educational, trial and error, how to feel at the level of 8 or more.

The crime is when the 3 person does not want to learn how to feel with more sensitivity; when he thinks a 3 is enough.

The person with the ability to feel at a level of 8 has most likely learned to be more sensitive. They have assessed the data acquired through their senses, they have processed and stored it, and they experiment with that information every time they train their horse. They use it in conjunction with what they are feeling today, in this moment of training.

How is the mouth? How is the horse responding to contact? Soft, giving, hard, moving? How is his posture, do his stifles move freely? What percentage of himself is he willing to give today?

The 8 person rides consciously, listening to the horse's signals, asking questions, analyzing the answers and adjusting their riding accordingly.

What other factors influence how we use feel and technique?

A person thinks like a person and a horse thinks like a horse, and a horse has no concept of a 1-10 scale for his training. So we must think of training the horse more like the flow of the seasons. Yes, you have autumn, spring, summer, winter. But you can also have winter days in summer, spring-like days in autumn.

Some horses take longer to train than others. Some are more difficult because of temperament or a lesser ability to

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understand. Some may have conformation difficulties due to youth or breeding – for example, too low behind and too high in the wither or vice versa; the neck comes in too low to the body. These things do not make a horse any better or worse for training than another horse. It just means that you may have to take more time, use your feel and the right amount of technique to help him develop properly.

Suppose you have a hundred acres and on it there are two trees you wish to fell. The trees are exactly the same wood and height and shape. But one tree is near the fence and in a clearing, so it will be relatively easy to cut it down without bringing in a lot of heavy equipment or taking a long time. The other tree is in the middle of the land, amongst many other trees. For this one we will have to spend a lot of time and use more equipment to bring it down.

We must learn to make connections between what we see and what we feel and use it to help the horse. For instance, sometimes when I feel a horse is too hard in the mouth, I will also sense that he is an angry or confused horse. He may have been trained right up to the top of the German training scale, but I know that he will be difficult to teach piaffe and passage. I will need to go back to the beginning with this horse to find out what has caused this confusion in his training, why he is angry, and to eliminate the cause.

The training of every horse can open our eyes and teach us something new that we can apply to other horses. It's like being a laboratory scientist. We test out what works best for each horse as an individual. We might find that one horse works most comfortably in a slow trot overall. We would ask for some bigger trot here and there, just a few strides at first, feeling for how he is responding balance and posture wise, how he is coping. We would not push him to do a big trot all the time at the start of his training. And vice versa. Another horse might be more comfortable to work mostly in a big trot. We would ask him to make the trot smaller when he feels relaxed and more balanced. We would ask him to trot – we would go by what we are feeling to gage how many strides, where and when.

How we ask, when we ask and where we ask depends on how the horse is feeling to us. It might be more one day and less the next.

When you train slowly and ask for things in moderation, you can better analyze what you are sensing. It's like counting sheep. If the sheep come slowly and calmly through the gate, it is easy to count them two by two or three by three. If they come too quickly because they are pushed and panicking, it is very hard to count them accurately.

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How do we find the balance between feel and technique?

One very important aspect of using feel and technique is knowing when and how much to compromise.

The amount of compromise can also be assessed on a scale of 1-10, with one being a little bit of compromise and 10 being the maximum.

If you feel that the type and amount of technique you are using is giving you a good result, you compromise by not pushing for more. If you feel that your technique is the right one but the horse is not giving, you may have to compromise less and push the horse to give a little more. But once the horse has given, you compromise a lot. You don't keep asking and asking for more.

Compromise is about honesty from the horse and the rider. The horse makes an honest try, and the rider responds honestly by not asking for too much.

Compromise is about rewarding the horse for trying. You ask for a little more and he gives it to you. So you back off. You say, that's enough of that for today. Thank you. That you back off is the horse's reward. He understands that you are happy with what he has given and he feels contented and confident in himself.

For example, I ask the horse to trot on the long side. He settles into a nice rhythm, he feels calm and forward. We come to the corner. He does that quite nicely, with good balance. There is no falling in or out. The flexion is just right. But he is losing power in the corner. Should I push him forward? If I do I already know I will lose the flexion with this particular horse. And if he cannot keep the flexion he will become crooked, and also lose his balance and rhythm.

So I do not push him for more trot, I am just happy with what he is giving me. If I tried to fix that one thing, I would destroy three other things. I use my feel to prioritize what my horse needs help with the most today, in that moment. I know if I keep developing his straightness, rhythm and balance, soon I will be able to add a little more impulsion in the corner and he will easily keep his flexion.

The more we open our minds, the simpler it becomes. And the simpler it is, the better for the horses.

END

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

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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 years of experience spanning classical dressage, doma vaquera and jumping, Manolo is dedicated to 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: www.manolomendezdressage.com

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