

Manolo Mendez

BEYOND LATERAL WORK

Beyond Lateral Work:

What comes after Lateral work?

By Manolo Mendez, Specialist of In-hand and Classical Equitation with Caroline Larrouilh



In this photo, Manolo is working with Dinamico on Spanish Walk, an exercise that requires balance and free shoulders as well as engagement, to be correct and beneficial. Like an artist, we are constantly refining our aids, refining our balance and that of our horse. We want his carriage to stem from within. It is a slow process, only time will build the right muscles and the right understanding, and the horse's desire. This exercise will benefit his extended work.

What comes after lateral work? Once we have taught the horse all the different lateral movements, we should not think we are finished and our lateral

training is over. On the contrary, through optimal diagonal training, working on two and three tracks, the lateral work together with the progressive development of the horse's natural collection into self-carriage is what will allow us to continue developing a more even, regular, symmetric horse. A horse that is balanced and fit, and will be able one day to meet the physical demands of pirouettes, piaffe and passage with even tempo, confidence and ease. Why? Because working in correct flexion and developing even and regular diagonal pairing strengthen the horse while lateral work keeps him straight and supple.

By now, we have developed solid basics and a stable training foundation, and we can begin to introduce more refinements. Always making sure that our foundation is solid and able to support the more demanding work we are adding to the training, so that the work is progressive and the horse is never overwhelmed physically or mentally.

We do not relegate the basics to the past thinking that we are now "advanced" and that our horse does not need basic work anymore. Sometimes, I will see a rider work its horse for an hour in a collected frame, or in a working frame, repeating the same exercises over and over, not allowing the horse any change of posture from the moment the rider sits in the saddle to when they dismount. The rider thinks the horse is advanced and so should be ready for the more demanding work immediately; but the horse does not know he is PSG or II or GP. His body, muscles, tendons and ligaments have the same need as those

of a green horse, and so does his mind. He needs a careful and considerate warmup and to be ridden in different postures that allow him to stretch his body frequently after more demanding collected movements. Keeping a horse in one posture, especially a collected posture is like putting him in a straight jacket, it builds a rigid frame and then the rider is constantly trying to fix what he, himself, is creating.

We have established the basic foundation of straightness and correct

flexion and it is time to get everything together; to purify the movements, to refine the work.

Think of carving a wood sculpture. The artist must first build a solid foundation so that his work is stable, balanced and enduring; then he can go back and refine his piece. Same for a portrait painter, he will first do the rough outline of a face and only later start to add colors, shading, details.

We should think of our horse as an unfinished work of art.



We start with the horse as he is born and through thoughtful training we enhance what nature has gifted him with, using lateral work to make him more balanced, suppler and stronger. Once our training objectives are clear, and our basics are confirmed, we work in the saddle and in-hand towards our goal. Working at the pace of our horse's physical and mental abilities. We play, we reward, we encourage movement that will lead to more powerful, more fluid and more artistic expression.

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 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

In this image, Dinamico is beginning to school a three legged pirouette. The Spanish Walk has loosened his shoulders, work in shoulder for and shoulder in, travers and renvers as well as half pass has suppld both halves of his body and strengthened and stabilized his haunches so that he can step well underneath himself with confidence. It is a difficult movement that demands great diagonal coordination, balance and power from Dinamico. Manolo has to use feel and tact to guide him without interfering with his self-carriage.



It is time to incorporate lateral work in our daily training more consistently, creating combinations of movements that allow us to exercise our individual horse according to his needs, to help him develop more engagement and joint flexion, more shoulder and hind freedom, more thrust a few steps here and there using shoulder-for, shoulder-in, travers, renvers, half pass in combination with different figures.

We can incorporate lateral movements on circles, voltes, demi-voltes, tear drops (demi-volte renversée), changes across the diagonal, down the quarter and centerline, in shallow loops and more to refine the walk, trot and canter.

Like an artist, everyday, we should seek to find the perfect balance and alignment that will allow our individual horse to flow sideways and forward with good energy, crossing its legs with a minimum of effort. As the horse's understanding and suppleness increases, so will his ability to self-collect, develop self-carriage.

I find that the horse schooled this way will feel very secure and enthusiastic. He will have a lot of confidence, and he will be able to participate with the rider in a more open way.

Collection means self-collection

In the last article, I spoke of natural (self-) collection and how it is achieved through

lateral work. At this stage, it is too easy to think it is all right to demand (force) more collection. If we do that, we will destroy all the good work we have done until now.

Collection comes from the whole body, and true collection comes only with time. Elegance and balance: That is what we want - not false collection and a horse that struggles and is held up by the rider through excessive contact.

If we make a horse collect too early, he will not understand how to use his body to give us what we want, and we will make the neck too short. If the neck is too short, the body is too long. The horse has to shorten his stride anyway as he builds up to the higher levels of dressage, and if he has been trained with too short a neck, his body will already be too long to "come under." (That is how a horse shortens his stride - by shortening his body.) If he cannot bring his legs underneath himself, it becomes a great strain and effort to attain the maximum suspension and spectacular action necessary for extended trot, piaffe and passage.

Even when a horse has learned to collect himself, we must never allow him to work collected for too long at one time. If we do, he will get tired, and, once again, will become too short in the neck and too long in the body. You will have the front end but not the back end - I see this all the time, unbalanced horses with the rider using the reins forcedly to carry and frame the horse.

When I ask a new student to show me what their horse can do, I too often see them shorten the reins to shorten the horse for collected canter. I see the horse cantering in this shortened frame for five, sometimes ten minutes at a time. I see how the horse starts to get upset. The horse has much better collection in the first few minutes, and then he starts to lose it because the rider is not feeling that the horse is getting physically uncomfortable. He gets uncomfortable because collection is physically demanding work. The rider is riding against the horse, riding the front end, making the horse tense. In a word, the rider makes it more difficult for the horse to be in self carriage rather than easier. Much better to be a true partner to your horse, work in a light and harmonious manner, and look for less, but better quality collected strides.

The other danger during all training, but even more so when we get to lateral work, is that we make the horse crooked. I cannot stress this enough. Unfortunately, this is very common. A nice, straight, soft horse is a very rare thing.

Crooked horses are made, not born

The horse can only move straight if there is even contact in the two reins. If we don't make sure of this with the young horse, he

.....
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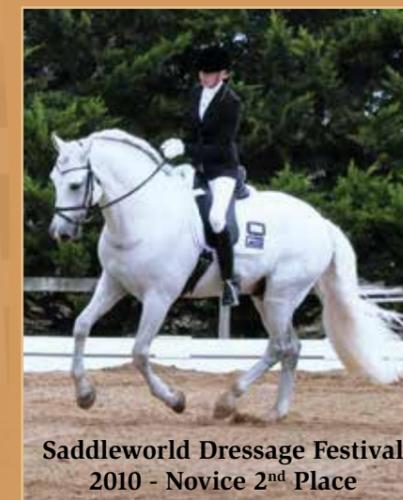
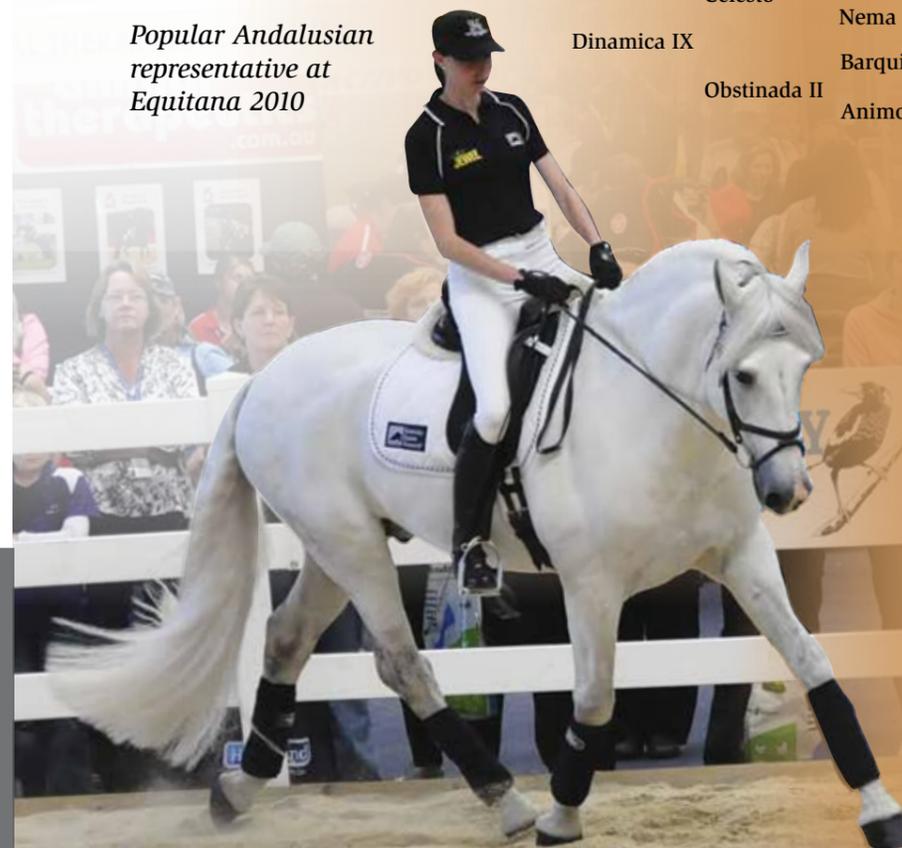
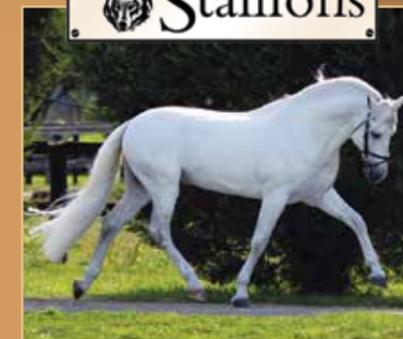
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It is through the use of lateral work that Dinamico is able to progress in his training and be introduced to these new movements that stretch and loosen, strengthen and balance horses. Working on the basics, weaving in lateral work allows Dinamico, a tall and large Andalusian stallion to be flexible, cadenced and balanced enough for Working Equitation and Garrocha work where he has to move with power and accuracy at the slightest request of his rider.



will always be stronger in one rein and therefore never be straight.

Some people say that horses are born crooked, but I do not believe that. I have many times watched the young foal run around his mother in the paddock. He passages, he canters, and he does flying changes – all so straight and soft and even. When we put the bridle on the young horse, that's when we start to change him. That's when we start to make him crooked.

I see many riders working their horses to one side for too long. They make one set of muscles, one side of the body stronger than the other. A racing car that has been in an accident and ended up with a bent chassis cannot be raced again unless it is given a new chassis. But we cannot give a horse a new body, a new mouth. We must be careful not to make the chassis crooked in the first place.

A crooked horse can often be fixed with the right training, but he must not and cannot be forced into changing. To that horse, crooked is the correct way to go. We have to tell him that it is okay because that's what he thinks at the moment. We will work with him over time to help him understand better what we would like from him and to fix his body.

For example, the right side may be easy and the left side is stiff, so we give him some exercises to help build up the left side. But then the horse, when cantering to the right may want to change to the left because he has gone a little too soft and flexible to the left. So we have to be very careful to question the horse's balance and evenness on both sides and work to improve the even, overall strength of its body. By the same token, we need to check that we too are balanced and even in our body, and do not favor one side over another; are not crooked in our alignment and blocking or weighing the horse differently to the left or right hand.

What NOT to ask for

So, in our training we are always careful not to do anything to create stiffness or resistance. However, sometimes we can fall into a trap as we discover what the green horse is good at, what he likes to do best. A young child going to school for the first time can get very enthusiastic about something he really likes. He might study and study and try and try at that one thing, forgetting about all the other subjects. He might get an "A" in that one subject and get a "B" and a "C" in others. But if you get A's in only one subject you will never get into the hardest university courses, like law and medicine. Grand Prix dressage is like the most difficult university course there is.

With a young horse, we have to work the first couple of years with a lot of enthusiasm and patience, to cultivate his interest in everything we ask him to do. We open his mind and make him think, okay, that's not so bad. Later, we have to be careful how we improve his lateral work and his collection. We don't say: "Today, we're going to teach you half-pass," and do nothing else. If the young horse starts to resist because the work has become too hard and we insist, we will feel him get stiff to one side. At this point, if we force him to maintain the movement by using our whip and spurs we will destroy the horse's enthusiasm, trust and desire to work with us.

The moment you feel this resistance while asking for lateral movement is the moment you should turn the movement into an easier exercise to restore the horse's confidence and trust.



The rider must remember that rewarding the smallest try is another key to developing a willing and content horse. Here, Manolo has dismounted after Dinamico put in a good effort. He is walking back to the gate where licorice and a good grooming awaits his horse. He pays attention to his horse's expression at the end of the session, using this privileged moment to connect a little more every day.

If we make everything too quick, we confuse the horse, make him nervous. The thing I find all the time, is that **nervousness creates tension and resistance**. The horse struggles, hesitates or even refuses. His posture gets bad, he gets short through the neck. Or, he may respond too quickly because he is nervous and confused.

A horse who does not respond in the right way or who hesitates is often called lazy. I call him lacking in understanding. We need to ask again, and we need to ask in the right way, clearly showing him how we want him to be – calm and relaxed.

What we CAN ask for

In training, we have to change all the time, do many different things and allow for the horse as an individual. Not only may he find some movements easier than others because of body type and personality, he will, like humans, have days when exercise seem easier or harder.

Everything should be easy in the early stages – walk, trot, canter with no collection or interference. In this way we can increase power and softness to the joints and muscles. It's like a dancer: If the neck is stiff and squashed up, so is the whole spine and therefore the limbs. The body cannot move fluidly so the dancing is expressionless.

If a horse wants to give collection at this stage of the training, you accept what is offered, but you must not keep that collection for too long. For example, on a 20-metre circle, you can ask for a few strides of collected canter. You slow down and slow down very smoothly and carefully in canter then you go forward again, asking the horse to lengthen his stride, before he gets uncomfortable or finds it

too difficult. You ask for the horse to lengthen just as smoothly and carefully as you ask for him to shorten. If it is too abrupt, the horse may lose his balance and posture, and this can lead to resistance and tension.

The flying change

As well as taking advantage of natural collection to ask for a little more, we can also introduce the flying change after the lateral movements are well established. For flying changes the horse has to change beat diagonally, from one side to the other – that is therefore also lateral work.

In my experience, in general, the rider asks for too much when the horse is too young, and too inexperienced. In jumping, a good trainer will do lots of cavaletti, a little jump here and there, not too much. He knows the horse can jump higher but at this stage it is about confidence-building. If the trainer decides to overface his horse, he takes a big risk that the horse will lose confidence and athletic ability by becoming resistant and uncoordinated. This can set the training back. In dressage we can make many mistakes like that, asking too much, too soon.

How do we know when the horse is ready to be asked for a flying change or any other new exercise? That's about feel, something the rider must develop as he works with the horse. If we develop feel, we will know when the time is right because everything will feel effortless. The horse will feel soft and balanced, and will have no trouble with correct flexion, balance and holding a rhythm. **Correct timing is about the ability to feel.**

When teaching a horse flying changes (or piaffe or anything) the horse may do something incorrectly: change differently from

left to right, right to left on one diagonal or change too late or too quick. As with any exercise, we have to give the horse time to develop gymnastically before we can expect perfection.

When a horse starts to develop some hesitation or tension through the half-pass or flying change, we should back off very quickly or we will create anger, frustration. So only when we get the opportunity, when we see some potential for the flying change, where the horse wants to give it to us, do we ask and then he will respond with more enthusiasm. When he hesitates or becomes confused, we go back to the basics or to other exercises. Walk, half-pass, a little travers. Then we come back again later and do maybe one or two flying changes, and he will respond well, and we can finish on a good note.

Blossom before fruit

So - a little collection here and there, one flying change here and there, a little shoulder-in, travers, half-pass. When we have trouble or the horse is confused, we can start again by restoring the correct flexion and the body position, changing the rein, giving a little break. This will make what we want from him much clearer to the horse. And when the horse knows the aids, the position, the language, he becomes soft and his rhythm is even. He is relaxed and clear-headed. He is balanced in body and mind. And balance is the main, the most fundamental principle of good training.

Then you can say: "Well, I have good roots, now I will have a good tree and then I can have the blossom and then the fruit." You can start to put it all together. You can connect all the different exercises, refine the movements and begin the piaffe. ✨

Manolo Mendez wishes to thank Alex and Sandra Wolfe for their friendship and patronage; and Wolfe Civil for its support and sponsorship. Featured in this article is Andalusian stallion Dinamico XII, Dinamico is part of the WolfeMen Stallions stable and is owned by the Wolfes. For more information on Dinamico and other WolfeMen stallions visit



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