

The Importance of Riding the Whole Horse: Supple and Tension Free

by Manolo Mendez Specialist of in-hand and Classical Equitation with writer Caroline Larrouilh.



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

“Bring the back up, bring the back up!!!” “Drive the hind leg under, more, more, MORE!” and “Make him more round, rounder” appears to be considered by a lot of rider’s to be the three keys to dressage. To achieve these goals they are taught to put the horse in a frame by pulling on the outside rein while kicking with the inside leg, often while keeping the horse in endless shoulder fore or shoulder-in. Instead of a flexible, supple and tension free horse, this approach creates stiff and crooked horses, with little enjoyment for their work and eventually leads to soundness issues.

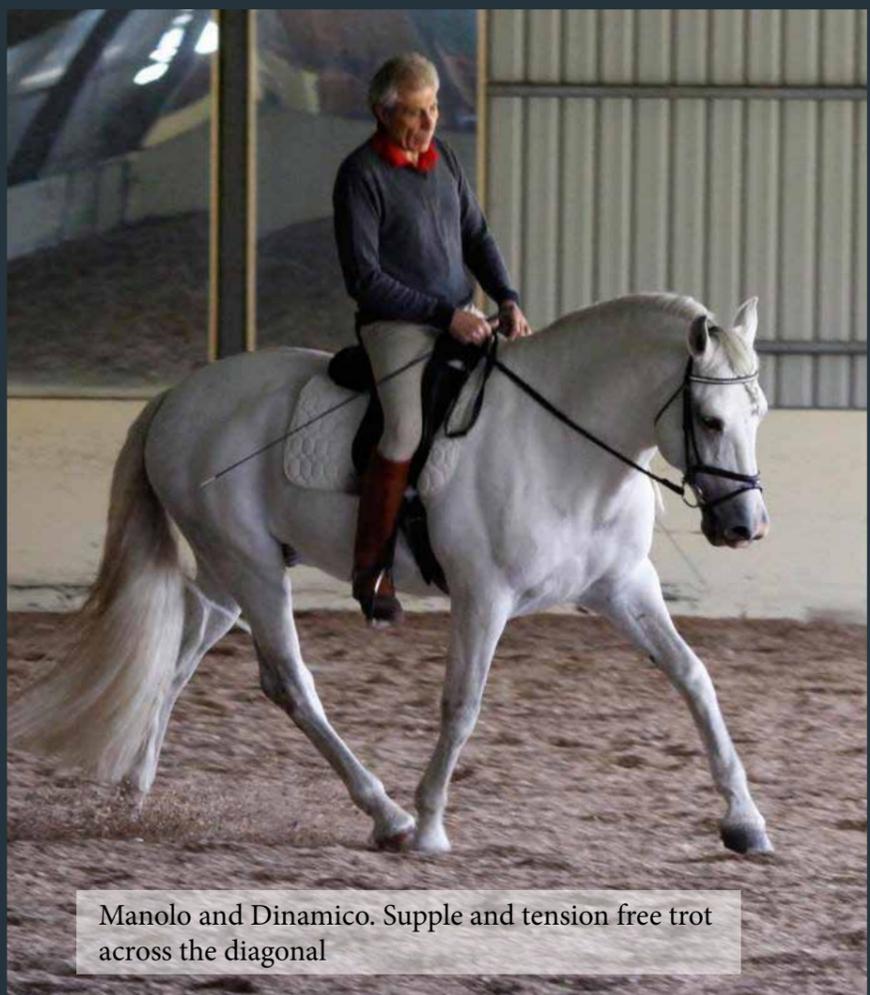
When I train my horse, I ride the whole horse, knowing that as I create postures that are biomechanically correct using correct gymnastic exercises, overtime, my horse’s back will naturally rise as a result of the whole body being straight and without tension.

As I am riding, I am always aware that I am sitting on the horse’s spine and that spine extends from

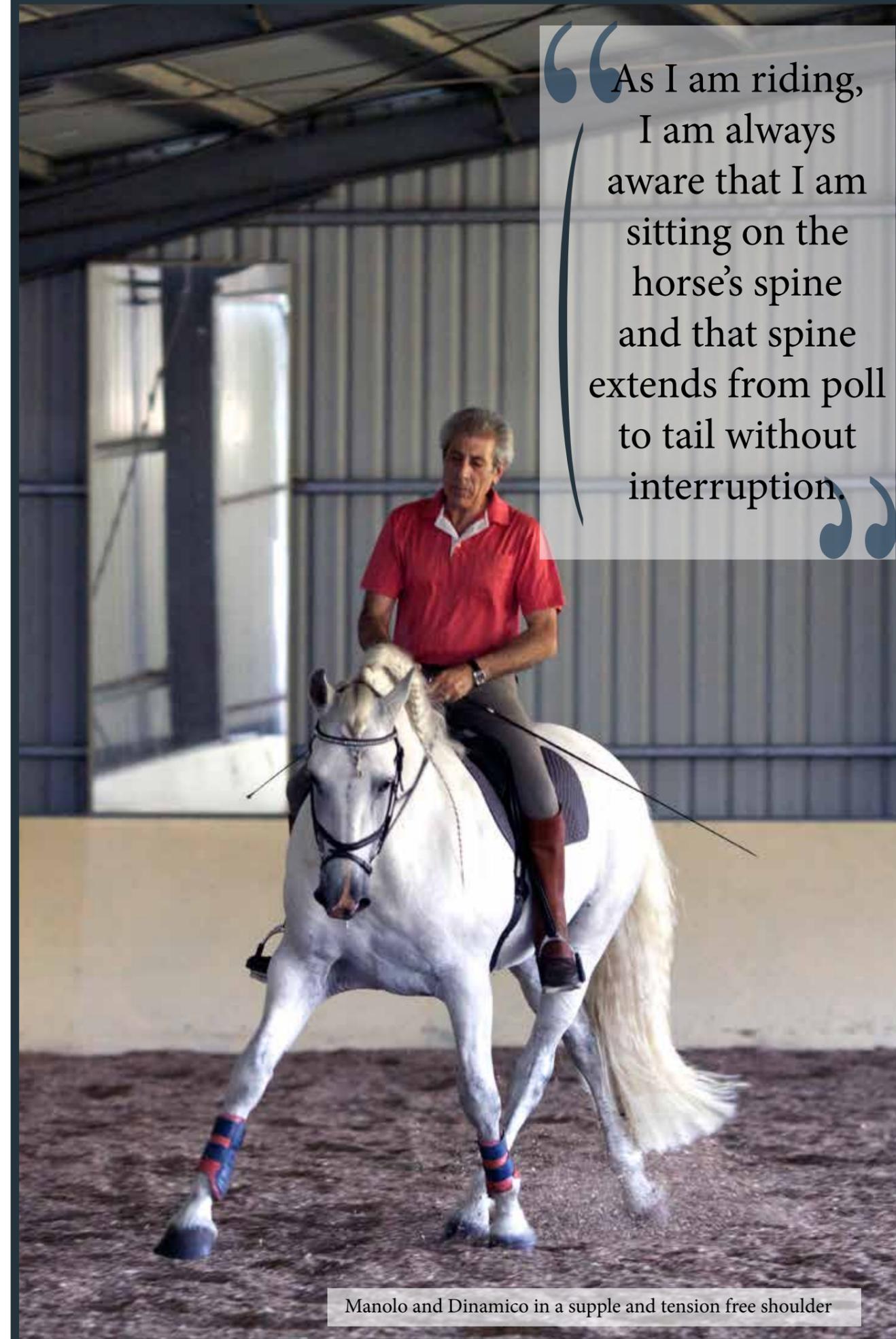
poll to tail without interruption. Just the same, muscles run from the poll to the tail uninterrupted. Anatomy plates show very delineated muscles but in reality dissection plates show that the muscles of the topline: neck, back and croup merge into one another and besides their individual function, also work as a whole.

My foremost goal in training is to make the horse secure and healthier with every ride. I work on balancing motion and energy without tension. I know that energy travels through my horse’s spine and that out of the spine, rooted in the spinal cord there is a complex network of nerves sending and receiving signals to and from the brain. I want to ride the spine poll to tail, without blocking it or damaging it by creating unhealthy postures. I remember that just like a train with many wagons, I have to create bend slowly and methodically without abrupt and exaggerated angles so as not to “derail” any vertebrae. I know that after flexion exercises I need to go straight before asking for

“As I am riding, I am always aware that I am sitting on the horse’s spine and that spine extends from poll to tail without interruption.”



Manolo and Dinamico. Supple and tension free trot across the diagonal



Manolo and Dinamico in a supple and tension free shoulder

more exercises asking for flexion because the vertebrae need the straight lines to re-organize so that their spacing just like a pearl necklace is even and they are not touching, rubbing. I ride the whole spine carefully because I want to avoid arthritic changes such as kissing spine, fusion, fractures and I want to avoid damaging nerve roots which can lead to coordination problems and much worse.

I know that my horse's spine is not very flexible but it accommodates different movements to different degrees in different locations and I understand what the whole body does to accommodate these differences. For example, under our seat, the spine connects to the ribcage and its 18 ribs (on average) so the motion of that spine segment is going to be very different to what the cervical neck can accommodate. In addition, because of the sacral spine portion being close to fused, I think of the five joints of the hind leg as shock absorbers. This is one of the reasons the stifle joint is so very complex and fragile: It has to absorb and distribute a lot of motion. Because of this, I do not insist on driving the hind legs under the horse to "raise the back" and create false collection. Instead of isolating one part of the horse, I focus on the whole horse and developing pure gaits with even, rhythmical, diagonal pairing action. Pure gaits are so important in dressage because they help create a supple, symmetric horse by developing a healthy muscle structure that supports the spine and the ribcage evenly through every expansion and contraction. If my horse were to be tense, crooked, short stepping he would then develop muscular restriction with every step that would impair his health and his progress.

To develop pure gaits and develop a flexible, supple, tension-free horse, I ride the whole horse gently into even contact, with the neck softly arched and the nose in front of the vertical. I am careful to sit centered on my horse and I do not sit stiff bodied but use my own balance, my body to help my horse find his own. I follow the motion of the horse's neck and head with sensitive hands. I do not want my horse's head and neck to move like a hammer vertically, instead I want a rhythmical forward, horizontal motion which I encourage and accompany with supple shoulders, arms, wrists, hands and trunk. To create a supple, tension-free horse I too must be flexible and tension-free and let my body influence my horse's.

In encouraging the horse to work with a de-contracted topline and ample, forward gaits that are not precipitated or rushing I strive to develop gait regularity. As the horse's



Manolo riding Dinamico in a light seat to assist the horse in developing a quality canter

body begins to softly arch from tail to poll, ideally (if the horse does not have spinal misalignment, or incorrect muscling that needs to be addressed first), the back automatically rises underneath me, over time, as strength builds. (This is why on a young horse you stay off its back and do not sit the trot!!)

I know that the correct way to developing a healthy back moving horse is to keep things simple and use forward motion to let the spine and the body organize itself. If I threw a rope on the floor and asked you to straighten it, you could either

handle every kinked segment and push it this way and pull it that way – which would never create a true straight line and would take forever – or you could pick the front of the rope and pull it forward, making it very straight with little effort. The same principle applies to the horse. You can kick it this way and pull it that way to make it straight or you can allow him to do the job himself by riding him softly, straight into two even reins.

Another reason why it is so important to keep a soft, living contact and allow motion to travel through the horse is that when a horse is framed by restrictive contact, it cannot be supple and tension-free. If I am an archer, I will find out very

quickly that the only way to send my arrows far and straight is to always unstring my bow when I am done. If I keep my bow stringed, I destroy its ability to bend, its give and flexibility. Same with the horse. If I keep my horse tight, with an un-giving outside rein, tight reins or even a martingale, tie-down or draw reins, I destroy his ability to move freely and expressively.

If I am looking at a student working with a lower level horse, I check that the horse's eye is between its hip and stifle point depending on conformation. At all levels, I check that the horse's poll is supple, its throatlatch open so that its jaw is not pressing against the wing of its atlas creating a blocked poll

and restricted air and blood flow. Just like a train will be unable to travel forward if any two wagons are askew, any time a joint's motion is restricted or blocked it impacts every other joints in the body – this is especially true for vertebral joints –and his ability to move freely forward. I check to see that the dock of the tail is not lower than the hip point and that the muscles of the entire horse are moving in rhythm, pliable, very much like a swimmer's muscles. An exercise I rely on to help lower level student horses become more balanced and supple is to ride shallow loops. On the long side, I will start with a 10-12 meter loop, and in time, I will ride a 20 meter loop and include a circle at the apex, only as small as my horse is comfortable with (I first ride a 15, 12, 10 meter circle and if my horse shows difficulties, I return to the size circle he was comfortable with). As my horse's flexibility increases, I will ask for a second or third shallow loop, always checking that I am not blocking my horse and that the gaits are rhythmical and pure. I make sure their shoulders mirror their horse's shoulders and that they accommodate the bend in the circle by moving their outside arm and hand forward as though they were turning on a bicycle or pushing a wheelbarrow in a turn.

As my horse gains strength and flexibility I keep asking him to gather his body and have a longer neck. As I work toward collection, I only ask a few steps of more gathered work before returning to a forward, down, out working posture. My aim is to help my horse's balance so that in time I will have more horse in front of me than behind as my strong and supple horse is able to sit and coil his loins. While I train, I vary exercises and I do not keep any posture fixed for more than a few moments so that the muscles of my horse remain supple and tension does not have the time to creep in and create stiffness. I give my horse walk breaks and allow him to look around and I reward him with a pat for the smallest try. I want my horse fresh and attentive so I do not drill him or punish him harshly instead I make sure he understands my requests so that he remains calm, keen and confident and mental tension does not creep in and create stiffness. Every time I interact with my horse I am careful to tend to his body and his mind looking to create trust between us knowing that the enemy of harmony and good dressage is tension. 🌸

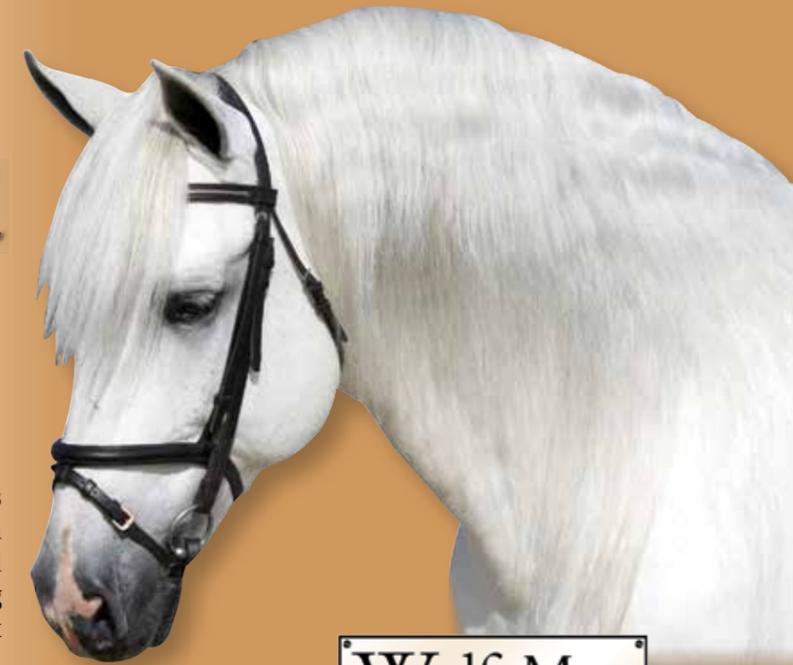
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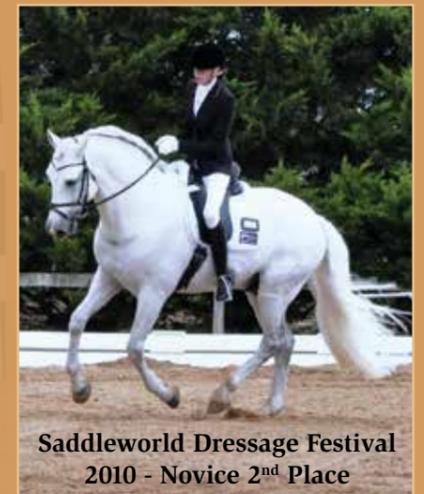
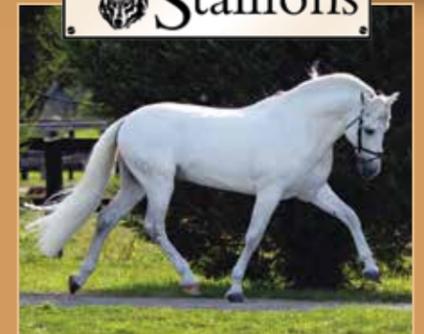
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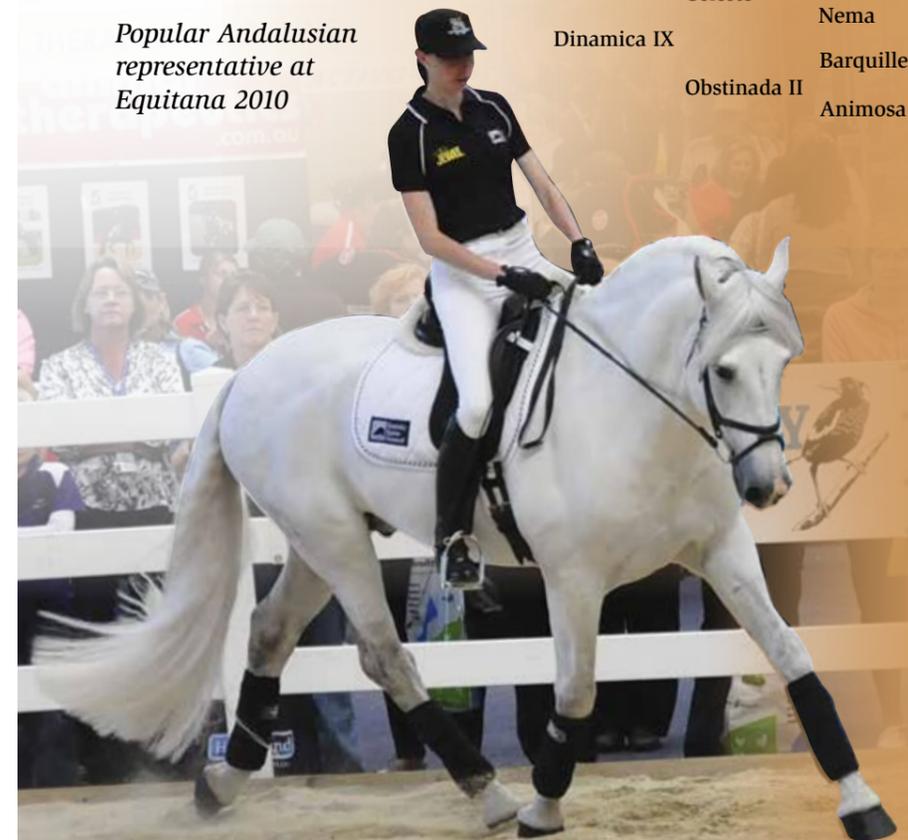
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