

Manolo Mendez Dressage. Manolo on growing up and the role of horses in his life then and now.

How did you get into horses?

I was born in rural Andalusia in the fifties. My family farmed and was of modest means and our horses allowed us to work the land, and drive the grain to town, allowed us to manage our cattle and take them to market. A horse took my mother to the hospital 25 kilometers away two days before I was born, and it is on the back of a horse that she returned to the farm with me, in her arms, two days later.

Horses were a part of our daily lives in so many ways, I cannot count. We farmed with them, herded cattle, travelled far and wide, took our women in their finest dresses and lace mantillas to the Feria on their backs, and competed against one another in a multitudes of games designed to showcase our horses skills and beauty. When we passed, they pulled the coche funebre, the hearse that took us to our grave.

I learned to walk holding on to the harness of the large, patient horses who pulled the plow and then the combine harvester through our wheat fields. I wrapped my fingers in their manes and fell asleep on their wide, sun-warmed backs. Horses were as breath to us.

It was a very different world back then.

A horse saved my life when I was a very young boy and delivered my mother, brother and I to safety, when the plain flooded and the river rose so fast and high, the bridge disappeared. It swam all of us across raging waters, my mother struggling behind it holding on to its tail, my brother and I, maybe four and three holding on to one another and the saddle. The water lapping at its withers and the top of its croup, it swam. I remember its head above the surf, the black of its eyes, determined to find the river bank and land - this horse was an island in the midst of chaos. Its name was Lucero. I have never forgotten.

Why dressage?

I did not begin riding dressage, I begin working the horses on the farm in the ways that kept them healthy because there was only one veterinarian for many hundred kilometers and he cost a fair amount. So I learned to work the plow horses so they shared their load equally, and to switch them so they worked both sides of their body. I learned to make my cow horse supple and loose so he could work all day blocking renegade cows and young bulls and not be sore the next day. Because I am from Andalusia, where we like our horses proud and artistic, I watched the riders who made their horses dance, pirouette, piaffe and passage at the Feria, and when I went home to our undistinguished but nonetheless beautiful horses, I played in the paddock and field with them, until they too danced. I

Manolo Mendez Dressage. Manolo on growing up and the role of horses in his life then and now.

rode my grade horse from one side of the rocky trails to the other, experimenting to see how I could shape them and feel them flow with me, learning the right angles for lateral work without knowing it.

When I was 14, I had learned a lot from the horses on our land, and I left home for the estate of Don Alvaro Domecq Romero Sr. who to me was the best rider I had ever seen, and whose horses rarely were injured in the ring.

There, Don Alvaro Domecq Romero taught me how to train, and then had me train horses in Rejoneo but also in Doma a la Vaquera and Acoso y Derribo. I trained horses for Doma a la Vaquera and Rejoneo and had three or four horses to work with every day.

For Doma a la Vaquera and Acoso y Derribo, the horses had to know how to half pass to left and right, pirouette to left and right, and do flying changes. The horses had to be able to spin very fast. Rejoneo also required travers, shoulder-in, half pass, pirouette, flying changes, Spanish walk, piaffe, passage. All these movements were common to Rejoneo and in dressage. But in Rejoneo we had to create speed at the same time as we created the movements. For instance, sometimes the horses had to do four or five pirouettes in the same place. These were very fast to suit the task at hand - working with cattle.

Three years later, when I was made First Rider (after Don Domecq) and Second of Command at the Real Escuela Andaluza del Arte Ecuestre in Jerez, I traveled to the Cadre Noir in Saumur and to the Spanish Riding School in Vienna to meet with other First Riders and study their programs. I found much in common between Spanish training and dressage, it was the same movements, but in slow motion.

Who was your first trainer?

I have never had lessons in the sense of being in an arena with an instructor telling me what to do because that is not how you learn to ride and work horses on a farm. I had an example every day as a child, and that was my mother, Maria de las Nieves who was a rider of some renown in our community and who did shows at local fairs. My mother was a beautiful and kind rider, I carry her example with me to this day.

What was your best ever trainer?

Don Alvaro Domecq Romero Sr. without a doubt. Don Don Alvaro Domecq Romero Sr. was a brilliant horseman, showman and a versatile rider. He was an inspiration for me and I owe him a lot. I learned from him how to ride different breeds and disciplines and when we started the Escuela we learned alongside each other. He gave me the opportunity

Manolo Mendez Dressage. Manolo on growing up and the role of horses in his life then and now.

of a lifetime and I am forever grateful to him. He was and remains one of Spain's most influential riders.

Who have you trained with over the years?

I became First Rider, after Don Domecq at age 18 and was at that point a "level 3" rider, training horses to Haute Ecole. I have never trained per say with anyone in the sense of getting lessons outside of learning to train with Don Domecq. However, Filipe Graciosa, Guillermo Borba, Francisco Cancellia d'Abreu, Reiner Klimke and Nuno Oliveira were frequent visitors to the school and as we rode alongside one another we learned from each other. I met Nuno Oliveira through the School, visited his place in Portugal and we became life long friends. He stayed with my family many times when he first came to Australia."

What has been your greatest success?

When I was younger, I would have said, being First Rider of one of the world's Four Classical schools, or getting a gold pommelled whip from the Spanish Riding School for excellence in riding, but today, I define being successful much differently.

I measure my success in my training of horses, in the light that radiate from their eyes and in their willingness to work with me. In the rhythm, the cadence, the lift of their steps. Free, joyful, proud. A happy, beautiful horse is how I define success.

Career highlights?

See previous answer.

What is the horse, to you?

Everything. Horses have always shared a large part of my life daily from such a young age and no doubt will continue to do so until I am well advanced in an age where I can no longer interact with them. I could never imagine my life without them. They represent all things to me.

What is your biggest lesson to pass on to riders?

Horses want to please us and if your horse refuses to work for you, you have to consider that he may be in pain, does not understand what is asked of him, or is physically not able to deliver. I have ridden thousands of horses, and I can count on the fingers of one hand the times I met a horse who truly did not want to work because of his character. I can count many times over the horses who I found to be in pain or sore, were confused, were over faced or ridden by

Manolo Mendez Dressage. Manolo on growing up and the role of horses in his life then and now.

riders who took no personal responsibility for giving clear aids and ensuring their horse was free of tension.

Do not allow tension to set in. It is the enemy of straightness and balance and of good work. If your horse tenses, figure out why and help reestablish a calm mind and a soft body."

What is your training philosophy?

Listen to the horse.

Who inspires you as a trainer?

The horses.

As a rider?

The horses.

Best ever pupil and why?

My pupil Chantelle Matthews because she is a good rider who is considerate to her horses and listens to them.

Best ever horse and why?

This is is a difficult question. I have had many best horses, and for different reasons. At the School, it was a stallion called Vendoval, today it is a stallion called Clint.

Best lesson you ever had, where you teaching, or being taught, and what did you learn?

Once, I was working with a horse that was brought to me as being uncontrollable and dangerous. He reared in-hand and he tried to hit me with his hooves. He threw himself in walls and tried to hurt his rider. He was not rideable. But with time, and working very slowly and progressively, with respect and rewarding the smallest try, with giving him a new foundation, this horse **found the courage to trust again** and today my pupil can ride him in lessons and he is a gentle horse who wishes to please.

This is a lesson I learn over and over again. Horses are gentle creature who wish to please us, if they do not, we have to listen to them more closely.

If you weren't working with horses, what would you do?

An architect.

What is your plan for the future?

**Manolo Mendez Dressage. Manolo on
growing up and the role of horses in his life
then and now.**

To keep training and sharing the knowledge the horses have given me. Help people see they do not need to force or fight their horses and that good training is gentle and empathetic.