

MANOLO

MENDEZ *Dressage* Developing the Basics and Understanding Straightness Better

Photos by
KATHRYN BARRETT
WWW.FACEBOOK.COM/KNMIDIGITALFUSION

by *Manolo Mendez*
Specialist of in-hand and Classical
Equitation with C. 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 EPOLE. FOR MORE INFORMATION ON MANOLO VISIT: WWW.MANOLOMENDEZDRESSAGE.COM



JUST AS WE WOULD NEVER PRESSURE A KINDER GARDEN CHILD TO JUMP STRAIGHT INTO HIGH SCHOOL AND EXPECT THEM TO BE ABLE TO THINK CRITICALLY AND PRODUCE 4+ ESSAYS OVERNIGHT, WE SHOULD NEVER 'JUMP STEPS' OR RUSH THE LEVELS IN THE TRAINING OF OUR HORSES.



KNOW YOUR HORSE

The more our horse understands his work and is confident in his ability to deliver what is asked, the more expressive and elegant he becomes. The horse needs to be able to understand each aid, each request, each exercise that he is asked to perform, in a very simple way.

It is the rider's responsibility to ensure that the horse is prepared properly before introducing a new request, the next exercise. This means not only that the horse develops fitness, strength, flexibility and balance to physically do the work but that mentally he is settled, calm and confident. Instead of having a set of rigid expectations based on the horse's age, breed, pedigree and the rider's goals and ambition, the rider should train the horse they have in front of them in an unhurried and uncomplicated manner.

What working routines work better for your horse? What do his muscles look like, feel like before and after work? How does his conformation help him do his job or make it more difficult? How long does it take him to warm up? What are his favorite exercises and what does he find more difficult? What is his confidence level? Is he bold or shy? Trusting or anxious? What does he have difficulties understanding?

By knowing his horse's preferences, a rider can customize the training and becomes more effective than if he applied the same exact program daily (and to every horse).

It is the rider's responsibility to adapt to the horse, not the horse to the rider. Who is the best teacher? The one who can adapt lessons to the different learning abilities of his students or the one who sticks to his lesson plan, word for word, and places the onus on the student to understand them regardless of their ability?

Only by knowing his horse and adapting the training to his individual needs will the rider truly be able to forge a partnership with his horse.

A NATURAL WALK IS THE FOUNDATION FOR GOOD PACES

Spent time to encourage the walk. It should be relaxed, and graceful. We must not drill or drive too much. Each horse has a different rhythm, find your horse's and work

with it. Your pelvis should be relaxed so each seat and hip bone can move independently, in time with the horse. Allow your shoulders, elbows and arms to move softly, so as not to obstruct the horse's movement.

Encouraging a free walk is the foundation for good movement in all gaits. We must remember never to restrict the horse's natural head nod at walk and canter (there is no head nod at the trot). The rider must have equal contact on both reins, and follow the horse's normal head carriage, so as not to block the head movement in any way. Once the horse is comfortable and relaxed, we occasionally halt, give a pat, then walk again.

A good trot and canter both develop from a good walk. We can also gradually teach the horse to distinguish between free, extended, medium and collected walk through becoming attentive to the movement of the rider's body. When the rider becomes stiller, the horse will learn to still and collect his own movement, and vice versa without the rider needing to pull hard.

SITTING TROT MAKES YOUNG HORSES HOLLOW

When a horse is only three or four; his bones are not completely formed. The young horse is naturally a little on the forehead, muscles are not yet fully developed. The horse has to be able to flex every single joint in the spine must be supple. This goes for all the joints in the body really. If we sit the trot on the young horse, as some riders do because they believe it makes them appear a better rider, before the horse has developed the correct muscles, we will start to jam the vertebrae together, the pelvis will lock, and stifles and hocks may become sore from too much "leg action." The horse will become sore and fatigued, his back, ribcage and withers may hurt - making saddling and girthing unpleasant - resulting in the horse quickly developing into a "leg mover" instead of a "body mover".

It is a chain reaction that cannot be ignored. Only when the horse has found his natural balance under the rider, and has found his rhythm and timing, can we start the sitting trot.

This is also true of canter: when often times a horse of any level can benefit from a rider using a light seat or even a ride in two points while doing anything from a canter to a hand gallop.

A GOOD RIDER MUST BE GUIDED BY WHAT HE FEELS BENEATH HIM AND HOW HE CAN RELEASE THE HORSE'S TENSION AND BETTER ITS ALIGNMENT.

He should experiment using feel and timing, and analyze his horse's responses to guide him instead of working by rigid theory alone.

Good breathing leads to good work.

Riders very rarely concentrate on their breathing, and they often don't think about how the horse is breathing either.

The rider must learn to breathe deeply, with "softness in the air". We must also listen to, and feel the horse's breathing. A young horse will often breathe too fast, because he may be a little tense about what is expected, and he is not yet completely fit. It is important to give a young horse plenty of breaks to recover his breath. Proper breathing encourages athleticism and mental concentration because it helps supply oxygen to the muscles and brain. All athletes work on their breathing. Your horse is an athlete, too. We do not want our horse to shallow breathe or simply hold his breath altogether.

A sensitive rider can feel the horse's ribcage between his legs, opening and closing with each breath. Because of this we don't tighten our girths too strongly, or the noseband, throatlatch strap or flash. We should make every effort to make the horse comfortable. Tight tack creates tension in the body.

By encouraging the horse's softness, and following the young horse's natural movement, rather than enforcing unnatural movement, stiffening or stopping the horse's movement, we will help the horse develop his natural breathing.

DEVELOP SOFT TRANSITIONS EARLY

It is of great importance to start to think about our transitions at an early stage. With a young horse, ask for transitions on a straight line only - make sure that the horse is not rushing or running away from the leg. Do not attempt transitions on a circle, he will not understand how to keep the bend and do the transition, and you will create tension and resistance.

Transitions must be done with softness, either with the leg OR with the rein only. To a young horse, the leg means "go forward" and the hand means "slow down". We must not

confuse the horse in the early stages by using both at the same time – this would be like driving with the hand break and accelerator at the same time.

However, before asking for the transition, we do ask with the hand for the horse to go a little lower with his head and neck. We want the nose to be in front of the vertical, not on it or behind it as we halt. Then we give a release with the reins and ask the horse to go forward from our leg.

RECOGNIZING CROOKEDNESS

Do not begin any bending and flexion exercises until the horse is able to walk, trot and canter around the arena in a comfortable rhythm with a light and even contact. Also vital is that the rider learn to use the reins as a pair, of absolutely equal length and the contact should follow the horse and help shape its posture but never constrict the horse's balance, his self carriage should be independent from the rider.

Riders need to look first to themselves when their horse is crooked. Often a rider uses too much inside (or outside) rein, causing the horse's head and poll to tilt inhibiting the horse's head carriage and ability to flex throughout its entire body. The poll is no longer supple, the horse's jaw, tongue and ability to swallow are affected severely, the body holds tension, impacting the contact and transmission of the aids.

Over time, the horse's muscles begin to set in patterns that can render one side of the body concave and the other convex. The longer the crookedness is left unattended, the harder it will be to restore symmetry so that both sides of the horse work with regularity and evenness. It is a challenge to rehabilitate the horse's body so that it can feel again what it is like to travel straight and free.

A horse can be crooked in different ways, not always to the right OR the left but sometimes both. Try standing your horse square and comparing his left and right side. If the bulk and height of his croup, hamstrings, shoulders, pectorals, poll and neck muscles are different from one side to the other, you horse is asymmetric aka crooked.

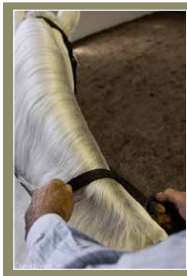
Viewed from the back, standing on a mounting block, a rider may notice the horse's ribcage bulges out to one direction, one shoulder may appear flatter, the other thicker, one higher or lower, the neck itself may appear more hollow on one side. These differences in muscles mass and skeleton alignment are clues to the horse's crookedness, and as you look at your horse with an eye towards symmetry, including the level and shape of your horse's hooves you may find more clues.

There are simple ways to help with straightening. For example, ensure your horse's nose is centered beneath its leveled ears, and aligned with the middle of its chest when riding. Most important to understand when executing lateral work is that the nose should be centered over the middle of the chest and the nose be beneath level ears. Another way to know if your horse is straight is to look at the chest itself from the ground. Is the line that separates the pectorals in the center? Is one pectoral "or chest muscle" much larger than the other?

Manolo demonstrating even contact on even reins while traveling straight. Note the soft contact with slightly open, sensitive hands. The horse's mouth has four billion nerve receptors and we must treat it with respect. Manolo's arms, hands and wrists are relaxed transmitting no tension or stiffness into the horse via the reins and the bit.



Turning left, Manolo has to accommodate the change in Dinamica's alignment and the lengthening of his right side. He moves his outside hand slightly forward to match the horse's shoulders on the bended line. The contact on the reins remains even. If he held on to the outside rein or pulled on the inside rein, he would make the horse crooked.



Turning right. Here again, Manolo is adjusting his contact to mirror the horse's alignment. His outside left hand is positioned slightly forward of his inside hand. Note the soft contact, there is not pulling involved in turning.

Straightening the horse is something a rider works on every day. Looking at the horse's body and comparing his right and left side is helpful in checking for musculoskeletal symmetry. There is a lot to be learned by checking for similarities and differences in muscles' size and consistency, and the horse's overall postural alignment.



In the absence of blockages in the spiral chain, a horse can easily call his pelvis, contact his abdominal wall and raise his back from withers to dock of tail.



RIDE EVENLY ON BENDED LINES

When the rider is able to ride with both reins even and with the nose centered he will find the circle line travels between the horse's ears, and exits in the middle of its tail and hind legs. Lateral work which requires a flexion through the horse's body obeys the same law. Even flexion allows the horse's shoulder freedom and ability to engage.

The rider can introduce flexion through a very simple exercise by going straight around the arena, and asking for just a little flexion to the inside as they go around the corner. Don't make the corners too deep for a green horse. Remember that every time you go around the arena one time, if you ride your corners with correct flexion, you are riding a quarter circle each time in a simple effective exercise that

offers your young horse a chance to learn and understand the beginnings of flexion when asked to go onto 20 meter circle.

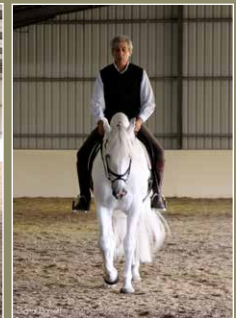
ALL IMPORTANT SHALLOW LOOP

Next we can add the five meter loop. This may seem like a simple exercise, but it is not. The rider must ensure it is performed softly and the change of flexion (the degree of which depends on the size of the loop) throughout the body of the horse is not asked for abruptly at the apex of the loop but prepared for carefully. We need to take plenty of time to develop our horse's balance and strength so that the horse can easily bend through every vertebra of the spine equally, from the poll to the tail.

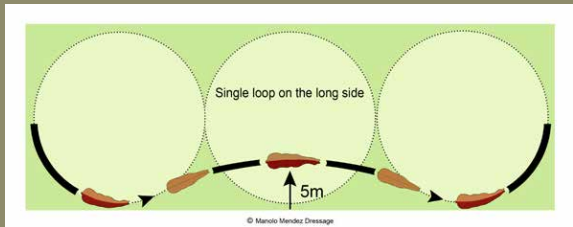
If the flexion is performed abruptly with a rider who is stiffed armed and/or has insensitive hands you are blocking the poll and spine. A common mistake is to ask for too much flexion, or forget to change flexion. It is a subtle movement and not to be overidden.

If a horse is crooked to the right, it will find bending to the right easier and harder to the left. The rider's task is to work towards equalizing both sides instead of working the "easy" side and getting frustrated to the "hard" side. Become aware, and be guided by the horse's spinal alignment and the symmetry or asymmetry of its body first and foremost, ahead of any other schedule based on age, breed, discipline or competition.

The five meter loop should be introduced down one side of the arena only, and performed here and there, not drilled



From left to right, Manolo demonstrating a horse crooked right, crooked left and traveling straight. Where are the nose, ears, poll and ribcage of the horse? Look at the chest bone, is it exactly centered or more to the right or left? What do you notice about the rider?



This may seem like a simple exercise, but it is not. The rider must ensure it is performed softly and the change of flexion (the degree of which depends on the size of the loop) throughout the body of the horse is not asked for abruptly at the apex of the loop but prepared for carefully.

repetitively. The purpose of this exercise is to help us develop SOFTNESS in flexion, and to introduce the horse to the bend that will, over a period of time, get larger. It requires the rider to FEEL his horse's balance and rhythm and help him meet the change of bend evenly.

It is the rider's job to not get locked into a conflict with his horse when he cannot perform an exercise.

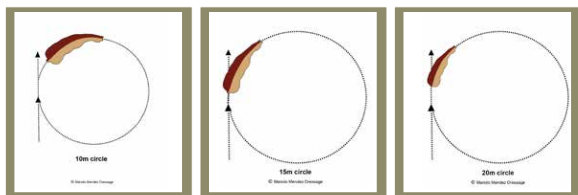
Too often, I teach riders who will accuse the horse of trying to "get away with something" or of being lazy, of hanging on one rein when the horse is physically not ready

for the work asked, nor understanding what is being asked of him. The rider gets frustrated, sometimes pulling harshly to get the horse to release it, and the horse gets more confused, anxious and reactive. A rider who wants a good partnership with his horse should take a step back and observe what is happening. Is my horse able to perform this exercise on one side but not the other? Is he crooked or not stepping evenly? Is the bit and bridle fitted properly? Am I asking in a clear, simple correct way? Am I blocking him?

Only when both sides of the horse's body

are EVEN can the horse travel straight and in balance. The rider should keep in mind that when he works to the right, he is also working his horse's left side, as you work the horse to the left, you are working the right side. Analyze the horse's feedback, and figure out what patterns and exercises would help him, instead of fighting to "make him" do an exercise. Build up towards straightening and suppling your horse gradually.

If you ride to help your horse, your horse will recognize this and as his trust grows so will he desire to please you.



Whether on a 10, 15 or 20 meter circle, a straight horse travels ON the circle. The circle line travels between the horse's ears, and exits in the middle of its tail and hind legs. A young horse should work on straight lines, first to build up the strength to work on circles and bended lines.

KEYS TO TRAINING THE YOUNG HORSE

The horse must learn to travel straight very early on. This is where he develops much of his gymnastic ability. A young horse being introduced to training should do more straight work than circle work, and should not be asked for any flexion on straight lines, just to go straight.

To be able to go straight, the horse's topline needs to be de-contracted (allowed to stretch forward and out) so that the legs can move with good rhythm and freedom.

Circles should be no less than 20 meter in diameter. The rider's hands should have gentle, light contact on even reins when traveling on a straight line or in flexion. What one hand does the other must follow to keep horse straight. Too much unrelenting contact means the

horse will not be able to develop independent balance, self carriage and ultimately correct collection.

Do not hold the body in a frame at these early stages of training. Your job is to guide with sensitive hands. The spine must not be blocked, nor should the tongue "bones" (thyroid joints) TMJ (temporomandibular joint) and poll (atlanto-occipital joints) as they are the first three joints in the body and have a direct impact on the back and pelvis action.

Instead of rushing your horse around thinking "drive the hind leg under, more, more" think of riding the whole horse with a soft arch in the neck and energy traveling throughout the whole horse without being blocked. This means not breaking the horse's neck at the third vertebra to put the horse on the bit or "make him" round with a short, unyielding, restricting contact.

It is very important not to repeat any exercise too many times and over exert the horse, as it places unnecessary strain on the same muscles, tendons and ligaments again and again, as well as creates boredom and sourness. ➤

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 www.manolomendezdressage.com



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