

Living Art - Baroque Horses & Classical Riding

The Royal Andalusian School of Equestrian Art, Jerez de la Frontera, Spain.

The Art of Classical Riding and the principles employed in the training of the horse in the classical style, are experiencing a renaissance and becoming increasingly popular with horse enthusiasts all over the world. The word 'classical' can be used concurrently with 'baroque' to indicate the origins of training

techniques for horses and riders starting with one of the greatest masters of equitation de La Guerniere in the 18th century. Despite the fact that the term 'classical' today is being used more frequently in conjunction with dressage training, it however only correctly describes those principles employed in a riding style that advocates lightness, permanent release of the aids, a horse constantly poised on the haunches and delicacy of the interventions from the rider. There are only a few centres of equitation worldwide that have dedicated their endeavours and stringently adhere to these principles regardless of ever changing fashions dictating riding styles and training methods elsewhere. These truly 'classical' institutions are the Spanish Riding School in Vienna, the Portuguese School of Equestrian Art, the French Cadre Noir in Samur and the Royal Andalusian School of Equestrian Art in Jerez de la Frontera, Spain.

The year 2002 will see the elite of the Equestrian world converge upon the small city of Jerez de la Frontera in southern Spain for the World Equestrian Games. Jerez being the cultural centre of Spanish horse breeding, in the heart of the province Andalucia, undoubtedly will celebrated this event in style and it will be the best opportunity for visitors to learn more about the Spanish horse and its superb capabilities showcased at the Royal Andalusian School of Equestrian Art.

The Royal School had its beginnings in 1973, initially based on a private initiative. Don Alvero Domecq, one of Spains foremost bullfighters on horseback, breeder of horses and fighting bulls and top horseman, gave a premier performance of what was to mark the beginning for subsequent shows '*How the Spanish Horses Dance*' (*como Bailan los Caballos Andaluces*) in years to come. This first show celebrated King Juan Carlos I presenting Domecq with the annual Golden Horse award (Caballo de Oro), but it

became the inaugural show laying the foundation for the Royal Andalusian School of Equestrian Art.

In 1983 the Spanish Ministry of Information and Tourism took over affairs and purchased the *'El Recreo de las Cadenas'*, a farm that included a 19th century mansion designed by the French architect Garnier (who also built the Paris Opera), forming a magnificent backdrop for outdoor performances. The mansion is surrounded by beautiful gardens and has been restored and refitted as a modern conference centre. In addition a spacious indoor arena was erected holding 1600 people including a box to hold up to 24 dignitaries and a royal box built for King Juan Carlos I and Queen Sofia. Attached is stable complex for 60 horses, arranged in an octagonal fashion around a central tack room. The stables each contain twelve spacious horse boxes and are named after five of the school's most legendary horses.

1987 saw the official consolidation of the Royal School, when King Juan Carlos I gave it the status of a royal trust, himself holding the position of honorary President. By 1990 the school had grown in size and importance and the *'Junta de Andalucia'* - the Andalusian Regional Government took it under its wing.

The spectacular show of the dancing Spanish horses is undoubtedly the culmination of the School's efforts, however, the institution does have other aims to foster and maintain the standards of equitation and horses. They also take great care in the training of advanced riders for high school dressage, general training of horse experts, training of skilled carriage drivers and the selection of Pure Spanish horses for dressage and breeding.

The Royal School provides a scholarship for those riders fortunate enough to get accepted for further training. When they finished their studies, the most highly skilled riders will be invited to join the show, presenting the Dancing Andalusian Horses. During the everyday training routine 60 horses have to be exercised by 20 riders, always under the watchful eyes of at least 2 senior instructors on the ground. In addition the school also runs training courses for carriage drivers, saddlers, stable hands and veterinary assistants.

For those aficionados of beautiful carriages the School acquired wonderful coaches and carriages from Don Pedro Domecq de la Riva and other beautiful tack items including saddles, harnesses and bits from the 12th and 13th century. A coach museum is soon to be opened for visitors to admire this collection and attend coach driving exhibitions held on specially prepared tracks.

Under an agreement with the '*Jefatura de Cria Caballar*' (The Spanish Horse Breeding Authority), each year the Royal School selects a certain number of young colts and fillies belonging to the Jefatura. These are brought in on loan, together with other horses purchased from different breeders, to assess their individual qualities for training. These horses enter a stringent training programme and ultimately are selected to develop those high school exercises and airs above the ground for which they show the greatest ability.

Due to the geographic location of Jerez and the School the majority of Pure Spanish Horses used are either from the line '*Cartujano*' or from the Military Stud also located within the city's boundaries. The '*Cartujano*' line recognised by their distinctive '*Bocado*' brand depicting a curb bit, is considered to be the oldest and purest of lines amongst the Spanish Horse Breed. It is the result of centuries of selection started in the 15th century by monks of the Carthusian monastery in the country three miles from Jerez. The other lines used by the School are chiefly supplied by the nearby Military Stud, the largest breeder of Spanish horses in this area. The stallion '*Evento*' ridden by Ignacio Rambla, one of the chief riders of the School, was bred and is owned by the stud. He has been successfully shown during the Atlanta Olympics and the last European Dressage Championships.

The Show '*How the Andalusian Horses Dance*' is a beautifully choreographed equestrian ballet, adapted from training exercises of classical dressage and '*doma vaquera*', which is traditional Spanish western riding. Each show features up to eight different sections, all with riders in beautiful traditional costumes. Initially, the young colts and fillies, still inexperienced in the early stages of their training, are shown under saddle in simple exercises of walk, trot and canter. Another section features the skills of the *doma vaquera* riders as they take the spectator through checking, leading and separating cattle. In the discipline of *doma vaquera* horses must concentrate all their strength on their hindquarters, in order to achieve the agility for quick turns and pirouettes, changing canter leads and quick starts from halt to canter/gallop.

Advanced movements are shown with a single horse and rider performing to music, pas de deux (two riders performing exercises in unison) or pas de trois (three riders and horses). In hand work features horses performing high school movements like piaffe, passage, flying changes, Spanish walk, as well as the airs above the ground like levades or courbettes. The latter requires the horse, once it has lifted itself onto its hindquarters to

actually jump up into the air and keep jumping forward a few steps. For the capriole, a horse going up on his hindquarters is required to jump into the air and kick out. All these exercises have their origin in century old cavallery battle manoeuvres, where the horses were used to get the rider out of a tight situation when surrounded by infantry.

For the grand finale, the big dressage quadrille with about 12 to 14 highly trained horses and riders perform in perfect harmony and symmetry all the movements of advanced dressage. It is this finale which gives the spectator a real impression of the Art of Dressage and the timeless beauty associated with it.