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Dressage

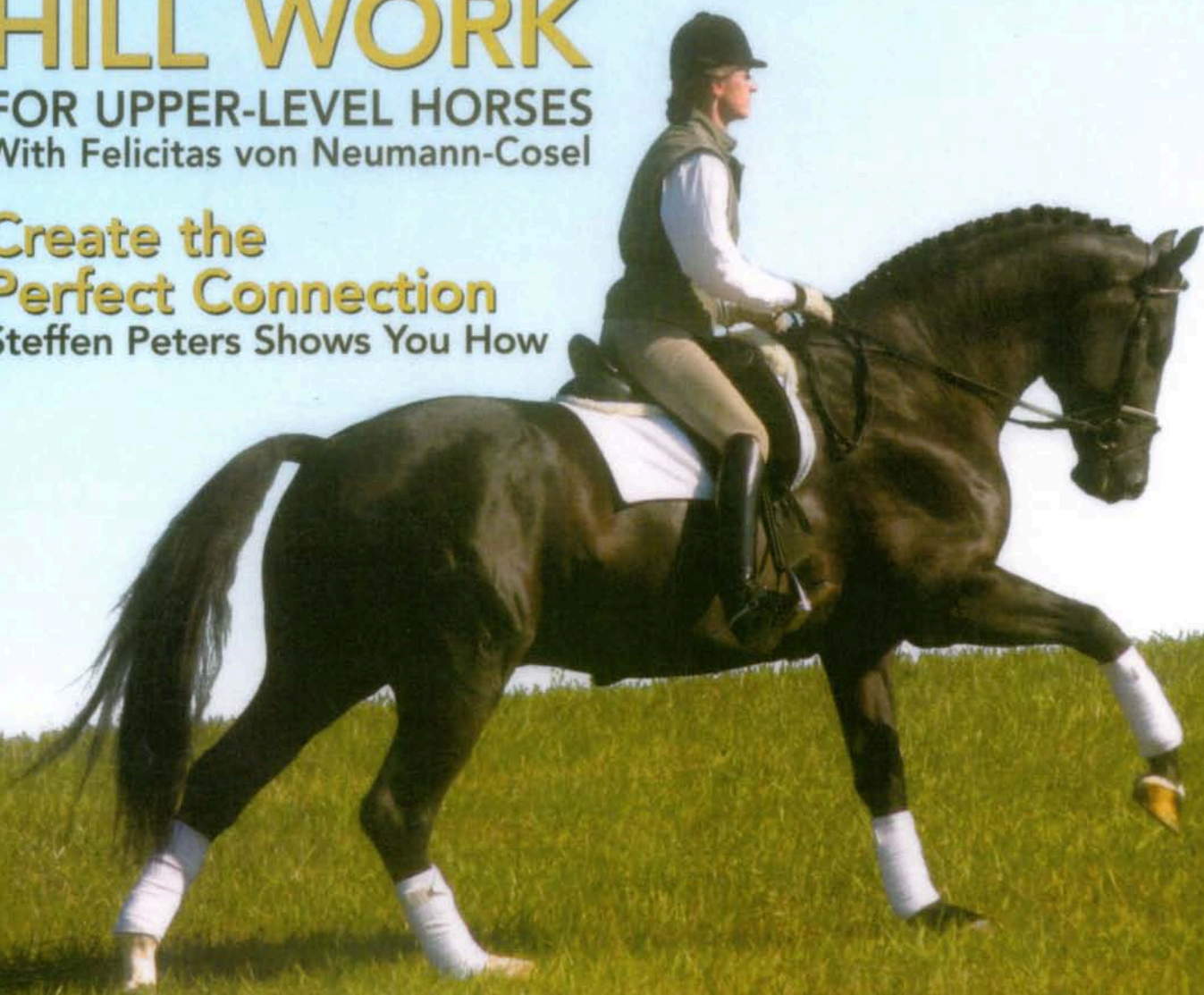
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February 2008

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RIDING IN SPAIN

IT'S NOT JUST ANOTHER CLINIC

An amateur dressage rider from Wyoming finds a clinic in Spain with Olympian Rafael Soto.

By Darlene Vaughan

After a lifetime of dressage lessons, this was just one more. Or was it? I was mounted on a wonderfully well-trained Andalusian gelding, and I was in a foreign country listening to an Olympic medalist giving me riding instruction. As this realization hit, I caught my breath and tried to grab and hold every detail of what was happening.

As an amateur dressage enthusiast, I am part of the largest group pursuing this sport, and I have worked hard, taking lessons, going to shows, buying the correct tack and finding the horses that suited my level of expertise. During a second trip to Spain with my husband, we discovered a wonderful riding center near Seville. Epona (named for an ancient Celtic goddess) is a family owned and operated equestrian center with dressage as one of its specialties. We both fell in love with the setting, the horses, the Garcia family and the great staff. After a number of visits "across the pond," we also feel like family.

The winter of 2006-2007 offered an opportunity I could not resist, even though



I would be traveling alone. Epona was hosting four dressage clinics with Rafael Soto, an Olympic silver medalist. He and his Andalusian stallion, Invasor, have been a crowd favorite with the international dressage community over the last decade. Rafael is a dedicated horseman living in southern Spain and spending most of his time at the Royal Andalusian School of Equestrian Art in Jerez teaching and training. He has been to the United States only a few times to teach clinics, since he prefers to be home with his family.

The second Sunday in February of last year found me with four other gals unpacking our riding clothes after traveling from Wyoming, Michigan, Pennsylvania, Wales and Malaga, Spain. We each had our own comfortable room in the hacienda on the grounds.



Darlene Vaughan and Rafael Soto pose with Trajano.



Ivy Ferron takes a lesson.

and even shouts of joy.

Thursday morning, we had another lesson but, that afternoon, we went into Seville to discover a Spanish tack store and to enjoy the art of Flamenco dancing. After four days of intense training, we were all glad to have some time off.

Clinic with Rafael Soto

Friday was the day Rafael was coming. Each student had two scheduled private lessons with him on Friday and again on Saturday. This was his fourth clinic at Epona, but you could feel the excitement in the air. The Garcia family and the other staff members at Epona are very respectful of Rafael for his riding, training and instructing accomplishments. Needless to say, the five of us were excited and more than a bit apprehensive. Would we be good enough? Would we be able to follow his instruction? Would our horses listen to us? We had our boots polished and the staff had our horses groomed, tacked and ready to go.

As we had been told, Rafael was a wonderful clinician, speaking fine English for those of us knowing only that language and explaining in Spanish for our gal from Malaga. He talked us through the basics. Then, as the lessons progressed, he allowed us to try our hand at the upper-level movements. He also concentrated on lateral movements to engage our horses.

Rafael directed us to do a bit of walk, then a forward trot, using leg yield and shoulder-in. After concentrating on straightness on the long sides, bending correctly on the corners and many transitions within the gaits, we did our canter work, using counter canter as a gauge for our riding.

Toward the end of our lesson, we were encouraged in the upper-level movements. I was particularly impressed

How to Get There

Travel to Spain is easy and affordable. There are commercial airports in Madrid and Barcelona that have arriving flights from the United States. Prices vary with the seasons and cabin preference, but I have found that if you book far enough in advance, round trip flights are available from the East Coast for around \$700.

Connecting flights are available to Seville, but I like the adventure of transferring to the high-speed train by taxi and traveling from Madrid south through the Spanish countryside. Public transportation is available in the form of plane, train, bus, taxi and, of course, rental cars. Driving rules are similar to those in the United States, so add a few days and drive to some of the white villages, famous Granada and an amazing palace of former rulers. History abounds everywhere you turn. Churches and cathedrals tower above the streets, and castles appear frequently on the horizon. Many historical places have been refurbished into tourist hotels and restaurants called *paradores*. More information on these wonderful places is at the Web site paradores-spain.com. The bigger cities are more difficult to negotiate with a car, so take cabs or enjoy walking tours and sightseeing services. I don't speak Spanish but, with help from my little translation book and the wonderful people there, I have never had any problem with accommodations, travel or eating.

The cost of my stay at Epona was about 1,850 euro (about \$2,711.64 U.S. The euro-to-dollar exchange fluctuates daily), which included accommodations and most meals. To learn more about this trip, go to the Web site eponaspain.com.

by how much preparation time was used for any change a rider requested. The shoulder-ins began at the end of the short side, which made the transition much smoother and easier for the horse. By Saturday afternoon, we were all doing flying changes on a serpentine topped off with a few steps of passage and piaffe and, of course, we had to do the Spanish walk with our Andalusians. We all felt like real dressage riders and cheered each other throughout the sessions.

I was honored to sit with the family and our distinguished instructor at lunch on Saturday. "I think you could not find better horses in the world for our lessons than here at Epona," Rafael told us. "Without them, I could not do my job, and it would be impossible to

do this kind of training."

We ended our lessons with a ceremony and diplomas for the five of us. We were oh so tired but oh so happy that we had had an experience we will never forget. I treasure the week, the good friends I made and the excellent dressage instruction. I brought home so many new training tools to use with my own horse. I also understand that the optimum method of rider education is the importance of learning from a trained mount before trying to transfer that schooling to a less experienced horse. 🐾

If you've been on a great dressage-training trip, tell us about it. E-mail the DT staff at Dressage.Today@EquiNetwork.com.



of Epona. Fernando Garcia, our host and one of the school's owners and directors, loaded us quickly into a van and we were on our way to a typical Spanish restaurant in Carmona to get to know each other over a great meal. I learned that Fernando's riding resume included show jumping.

Preparation

Monday morning we began a marathon of preparation for our lessons with Rafael. We each had a private long lesson and then small group lessons with head instructor Caty Garcia in the covered arena. The longe horses were so solid and rhythmic that we had only to pay strict attention to our positions and transitional cues.

One of the goals was to match each rider with the perfect horse for the week. I drew one of my favorites, Trajano, a bay Andalusian I had ridden on previous visits. With the number of

highly trained horses among the 60 that are available at Epona, all of us were well-mounted in no time.

Caty is a talented and experienced instructor who has worked with many international competitors and holds some of the most coveted certifications in Europe. She was able to quickly discern our strengths and weakness as riders and, beginning with the basic gaits and a snaffle bridle, we climbed through the ladder of relaxation, obedience, lateral movements and, finally, collected work.

We are not upper-level riders, so it was a steep learning curve, impossible without these horses. Using leg yield and shoulder-in exercises to help us get a better feel for the connection of the hand to bit and a supporting leg on the horse, we understood much clearer the concept of teamwork between horse and rider. Caty was persistent and committed that all work was done properly and in a manner that kept our horses and us happy and working toward the goal of Rafael's lessons later that week. Most

American riders do not get this opportunity, and I marveled at the huge steps forward we all made in our riding skills in such a short time.

Higher Education

The other director of the school, Jane, Fernando's wife, used her marvelous culinary skills and served us a delicious luncheon, after which we observed the traditional Spanish siesta time. Jane is another talented rider and instructor herself. Although she leaves most of that to her daughters now, she was just as excited as we were about our progress during the week. After another lesson in the early evening and another wonderful meal, we retired for the night a bit sore but totally satisfied in the food department. This was to be duplicated for the entire stay.

Tuesday we traveled to Jerez and the Royal Andalusian school of Equestrian Art (*Real Escuela Andaluza del Arte Ecuestre*) to watch a performance by the professors and students. It brought tears to our eyes. Applications for admission come from all over the world, but few students are accepted each year at this government supported school. Vivi Garcia, Caty's sister (Fernando and Jane's other daughter) has just completed four years there. A bit of Jerez's famous sherry made for a sleepy ride home, but soon we were back on the horses with more lessons.

By Wednesday, Caty had us graduate to the full bridles, and we began to attempt some of the finer movements of our capable horses. This meant complete instruction in how to hold the double reins and the different uses for the snaffle and curb bits. For those who have never ridden a passage, piaffe or flying change, the experience can be overwhelming—lots of smiles, laughs

Dorlene Vaughan



Fernando Garcia (left) with Rafael Soto and Linda Tomkinson on Mr. Bean