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# A Canadian Equestrian Abroad

In her last column, Vanessa Annand described the day-to-day schedule of a working student at Epona Equestrian Center in Spain. In this issue, she explores the different schools of thought that influence riding at Epona and make her experience there a varied one.

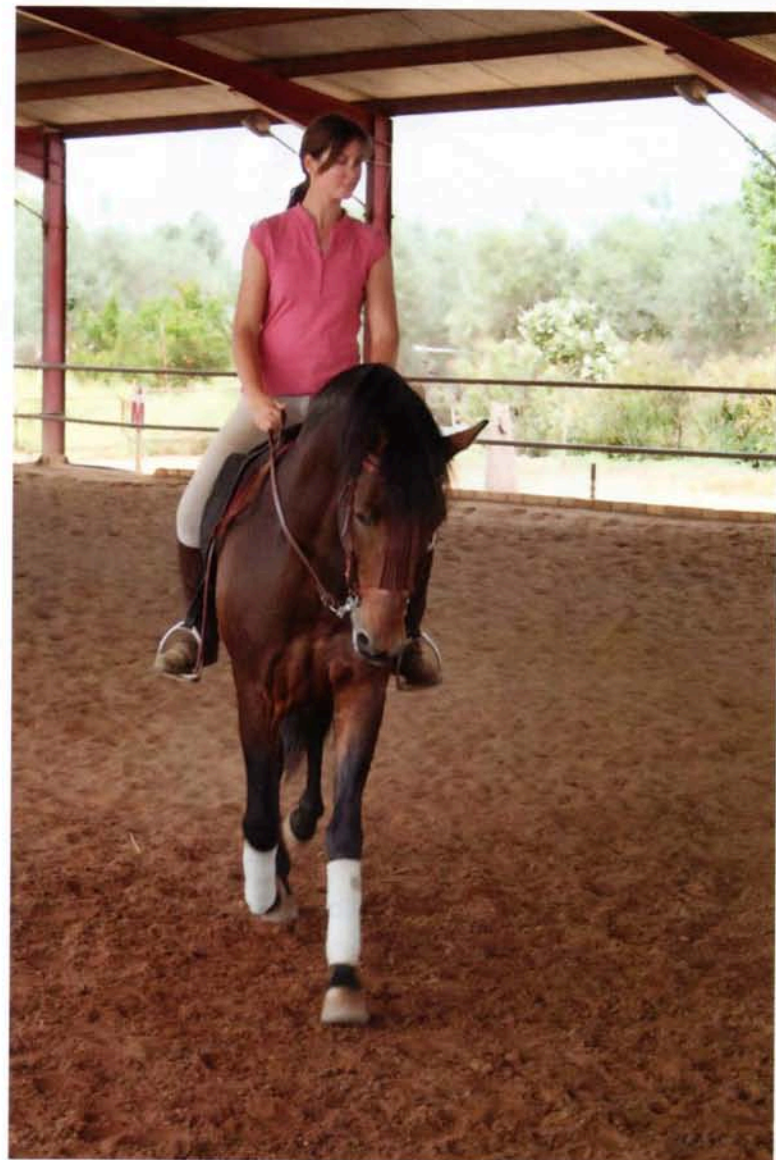


by Vanessa Annand

The phrase “2 for 1” conjures unpleasant visions for me of bargain bins full of shirts mangled beyond recognition by the talon-esque hands of serious shoppers. My stint at Epona Equestrian Center, however, has cast this phrase in a new, much more appealing light.

The “2 for 1” deal offered by the center is its advocacy of both British and Spanish styles of riding. This unique combination was a deciding factor in my acceptance of the working student position there.

The British Horse Society (BHS) is, perhaps, the most famous organization based in the UK that works “for the good of every horse and rider” as its motto proclaims. This charity produces a staggering array of educational manuals that teach everything from how to mount a horse correctly to how to make a hay wisp for grooming purposes so sturdy that it will outlive Friends re-runs. The BHS has also devel-



oped a system of qualifications for riding instructors and stable managers that is famous for its rigorous advocacy of safety above all else. The BHS informs nearly every aspect of riding throughout the UK, and you would be hard-pressed to find any horsey person there who was not involved with it at some level.



Karin Borg rides Dollar with a traditional Spanish *mosquero* – a fringed browband to keep flies from irritating the horse.



The stallion Dollar, ridden by Karin Borg, shows off the Spanish Walk for which Andalucian horses are famous.



Vivi Garcia works on piaffe with Nino.

Riding in Spain, by contrast, tends to be about spectacle more than safety, and there is no real BHS equivalent to standardize it. Springtime in Andalucia heralds the season of fairs or *ferias* that began as markets where horses and livestock were sold, but have evolved into enormous parties. Women in flamenco dresses dance *sevillanas* in striped cassetas (pavillions), and horses are ridden through the streets. It is not unusual to see a woman in her ruffled gown perched precariously behind her paramour on the back of a young Andalucian stallion while prams, balloons, and tourists flailing their cameras swarm all around them. It's a sight that would boggle anyone attempting to conduct the BHS's famous risk assessment.

In spite of the different priorities of the British and Spanish styles, the marriage of the two has been a success at Epona. As the first BHS-approved riding center outside of the UK, Epona started as a small riding school with a large ambition to impart some of the BHS's high standards of horse care and safety to local Spanish students. Before it

switched to its present focus on equestrian tourism, Epona was BHS training and examination center for several years. Dozens of graduates went on to spread this respected and systematic method of horsemanship throughout Spain. Jane Garcia, owner and founder of Epona, received the first BHS Overseas Award for these efforts.

After exerting such an influence over horsemanship in Spain, it was only fitting that traditional Spanish riding techniques should exert an equal influence over Epona. When Vivi Garcia was accepted to the Royal Andalusian School of Equestrian Art, she began a journey that would see her train under Olympic riders such as Rafael Sotto. More than that, she experienced Spanish riding in its purest form, learning the methods of the *vaqueros* (Spanish cowboys) who must be able to execute walk to canter and pirouette in an instant in their work with bulls. She also learned how to execute the high school movements—including *courbette*, *piaffe*, *passage*, and, of course, the Spanish Walk.

When asked what overall philosophy she learned at the school, Vivi does not spout some cryptic slogan about the beauty of a perfect horse dancing. She simply says, "Every horse needs a chance. Every horse can get to the top with time, patience, and discipline." In keeping with this motto, there are a range of horses at Epona, all of whom are constantly being trained and improved.

Take Adriano, for instance, the striking grey gelding purchased from a beach ride outfit. When he arrived at Epona to begin life anew as a lesson horse, he could not conceive that there could be such a thing as a right canter lead. As he'd only ever had to canter in a straight line down a beach, he'd simply always cantered on the left lead. With persistence, he came round to this new concept. By the time I arrived at Epona, he was something of a schoolmaster, and I had the honour of helping to teach him the beginnings of *piaffe* – exceptional work for a horse who might have lived out his days knowing nothing more than how to trot through the surf.

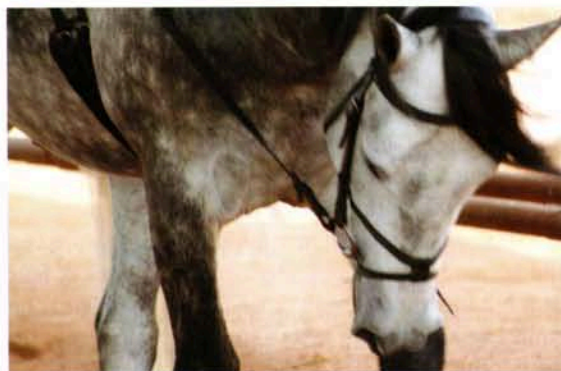
The horses are the ones who benefit the most from the combination of British and Spanish techniques. The meticulous care, so characteristic of a BHS yard, shows in their



gleaming coats and quiet manners. The flashy high school movements that typify the Spanish school of riding allow them to show off.

And show off they do. My first encounter with a high school movement was entirely inadvertent when I was riding an Andalusian mare named Pepita. At first I thought she'd gone lame, as her walk suddenly took on a much slower and exaggerated cadence.

"She's doing Spanish Walk!" called Vivi. "She's showing off."



Nino (which translates as "boy" or "child") is one of the most striking Andalusian stallions at Epona.

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Don't let her do it without you asking."

And I've seen this numerous times since – Pepita randomly breaks into Spanish Walk because it elicits squeals of delight from any rider who's never experienced it before. She is a Spanish horse and that, she appears to have concluded, is what any self-respecting Spanish horse should do.

Of course, I've also benefited from the combination. I've been learning how to lunge in the BHS-approved method: whip and lunge line held at a meticulous angle, voice commands regular and authoritative. But when the vet turned up to do a check on an Andalusian stallion who was being sold, I found myself obliged to lunge the horse with nothing more than the line. It involved a bit of arm flailing and perhaps did not look very dignified, but I learned a lot in those ten minutes about getting a horse to respect the voice without the assistance of an extraneous aid.

There is another "2 for 1" aspect to Epona. This is the program that allows guests to do both hacking and dressage lessons. I benefit from this program as well, as I occasionally get a break from my schooling and escort a hack into the Andalusian countryside, where perhaps the most noticeable

on the crops," says Fernando Garcia, the head guide. "You can ride forever like this. No fences. It's a rider's paradise."

This, perhaps, epitomizes the attitude that has allowed Epona – and me, by extension – to reconcile two different attitudes towards horsemanship.

When asked what overall philosophy she learned at the school, Vivi does not spout some cryptic slogan about the beauty of a perfect horse dancing. She simply says, "Every horse needs a chance. Every horse can get to the top with time, patience, and discipline."

feature besides the olive groves is the lack of fences. There is simply a strip of land one meter wide that no one ploughs that divides one field from another.

"Just stay on that strip and don't step


Rather than focusing on the limitations of each, both are embraced in equal measure. An open-mindedness that can incorporate practical safety and sheer spectacle.

No fences. It's a rider's paradise. 🐾

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