

## { FEATURE ARTICLE }

### ALTA ESCUELA HORSEMANSHIP FOR PERUVIAN HORSES

#### Collection & Impulsion

BY Adele McCormick Ph.D. & Deborah McCormick, Ph.D.

#### INTRODUCTION

When we use classical theory in horsemanship, we can take our riding to a new level. Our horses become happier as we bring insight and knowledge to our work. In this method called "alta escuela" we strive to help our horses achieve balance, relaxation and flexibility.

Alta escuela originated thousands of years ago and was disseminated by Indo-European tribes such as the Celts. It was subsequently preserved in Latin countries throughout the world during different times in history. It has been practiced in Spain, Portugal, France, Southern Italy, Mexico and Peru, to name a few. It is not a Germanic style of dressage/equitation.

It is best described as, "Equestrian art is the perfect understanding between the rider and his horse. This harmony allows the horse to work without any contraction in his joints or in his muscles, permitting him to carry out all movements with mental and physical enjoyment as well as with suppleness and rhythm."<sup>1</sup>

In a clinic on dressage and equitation we held at our ranch in 1991 taught by French ecuyer Dominique Barbier and Peruvian maestro Francisco Rabines, the clinic participants, all Peruvian Horse breeders and owners, came to learn Peruvian equitation and how it evolved from the 15th to the 17th century. Although there was not a significant horse population in Peru until the 16th century we traced how the early colonial Peruvian horseman drew from the classical methods of training used in Spain by their forefathers. This loyalty was to insure continuity and tradition. We explored the baja and alta escuela schools of horsemanship. Out of our lively discussions, we gained a greater understanding of many of the principles of fine equitation, such as collection and impulsion. Collection teaches the rider how to contain the energy (impulsion) of the horse while the animal maintains its vigor, aliveness and air of elegance.

Collection and impulsion are fundamental in all forms of equitation. In the case of Peruvian Horses we want the horse to shorten and round its frame, shift its weight from the forelegs to the rear ones, crouch and propel its energy from the rear. When we accomplish this we achieve a more elegant and animated way of going. The hindquarters become engaged and we gain more lift in the front legs. Since the rear is the engine of the horse when it is used properly the horse is capable of using its maximum power. Ironically, once the horse can use this power in constructive ways the horse is easier to handle. The horse that is obedient and uses the hind end properly feels more like a feather than dead weight.

#### A MEMORABLE DAY

We will never forget a Champion of Champion Breeding Mare class at the National Peruvian Horse Show years ago. The stands were full and a hush came over the crowd as the two competing mares entered the arena. Both were beautiful, exceptionally well gaited and disciplined. However, the crowd could not take their eyes off of the palomino mare. It wasn't her color that drew the audience's attention; it was an indescribable quality. She had an electrified presence. The mare exuded a quality of 'lightness' and this ecstatic display reflected the unity of horse and rider. The rider and mare were so closely attuned that it appeared as if they were breathing in unison.

The mare moved with grace and the sensual way in which she performed her paso llano gave her the impression of floating. The timing of her gait was so exquisite that it captured the crowd. It had an amplified resonance that played a universal song like the rhythm of a heartbeat. Every step she took had the stealth of a big cat. The audience was mesmerized. The mare won the title of Champion of Champion Breeding Mare, Laureada on that day. As she made her victory lap, the crowd jumped to its feet and gave her a standing ovation. All were hoping for one more chance to see this majestic



Painting courtesy of Dr. Adele von Rust McCormick.



Deborah McCormick, Ph.D. riding in balance and with proper collection. Photo by Lila Foucher.

being. The collection and impulsion made the movement of horse artistic.

### COLLECTION

Since the horse is a creature with two inborn attributes: weight and strength, our goal in riding and training is to teach the horse how to develop and use its strength in constructive ways. When we do, the horse can carry its weight and ours without being adversely impacted. Hence, collection and impulsion are the two necessary ingredients to be able to succeed in this objective.

Therefore, we collect a horse to not only achieve beauty and elegance but to insure soundness and longevity. Since horses are not ridden in the wild we need to help them adjust to our weight. Under the weight of the rider, without collection, the horse experiences a feeling of being crushed. To compensate for this added weight, the horse needs to learn to raise his withers and tip his haunches (pelvic area) under. The tipping under of the haunches gives the horse the strength and power it needs to hold up his spine. The horse lifts its core. These changes result in the horse shortening its median line from the hip to the shoulder; and this is why collected horses appear to have a frame that is shortened rather than elongated. The horse's back when collected should look round instead of flat or hollow. Collection teaches the horse to carry its rider in a pain free way and restores its natural balance. A vertical head set (the nose is tipped down), typically goes along with collection but does little to create it. A collected horse does not star gaze.



Even in halter, a horse may carry themselves with beautiful collection and impulsion. Note the head carriage and topline of the fill even with the minimal aids being given to her. Photo by Jack Slottey.

In a collected frame, a horse is better able to defy the force of gravity and actually appears airborne. Once collection begins the horse gains control over its body and its various movements. The horse also develops more suspension, meaning it can lift its weight off the ground so the horse becomes "light" instead of "heavy". In lightness, gaited horses sound musical when their hooves hit the ground. By contrast, a Peruvian Horse that is heavy will make the sound of a thud as its hooves strike the ground.

Over time, without proper collection, the horse will not only be negatively impacted by its own mass but also the weight of the rider. This can result in back problems for the horse, which often manifest in the extremities as leg problems.

Many of the difficulties horses have with collection stem from their conformation. Some horses are naturally downhill while others are uphill. The downhill horses have a strong natural tendency to bear excessive weight on their front legs instead of the rear ones.

By contrast, uphill horses are those that have a natural inclination to collect their bodies before moving. The epitome of an uphill horse in the Peruvian breed is the horse that is called "gateado", meaning the horse crouches and moves like a cat.

Since the Peruvian is a Spanish-blooded horse, it is built to collect more readily than other breeds. The reason for this natural ability is that conformation of all Spanish blooded horses should be more square and not rectangular. Warmbloods and thoroughbreds for example are rectangular.

Permitting a Peruvian Horse to overload its front will also lock the shoulders and make the horse stiff. By the same token allowing the horse to shuffle its hind legs locks the rear joints. Locking of the joints leads to stress on all the limbs. Stiffness will also interfere with the timing and beauty of the gait. Stiffness is incredibly debilitating to the entire musculoskeletal structure of the animal.

Over and above a physical ability collection is a state of mind. Since the horse is a mind/body animal, meaning its mind affects how it moves and visa versa, we need to pay attention to not only the body of the horse when riding but to its psyche. For example, collection is impossible if the horse lacks sufficient attention or is overly anxious. The reason for this is that how a horse feels about what the rider or handler is asking will impact its entire body.

Collection requires a horse with an attentive mind. We not only ask the horse to gather itself together but we request that the horse listen to our subtle requests and be in a perpetual state of readiness.

If we expect our horses to be glamorous we need to ride in the same way. This means with poise and finesse. Good equitation is a must for the rider who hopes to collect his or her horse and have the animal exude its nobility. If the rider is sloppy the horse will look as if all its body parts are rumbling. Uncollected horses do not look statuesque. Too many riders hover over the horse by leaning too far forward. This weighs down the front end of the horse so the horse looks tight in front. Others lean too far back and ride with their legs forward giving the impression that their legs are going to wrap around the neck of the horse. This also throws the horse off balance. All of these contorted positions of the rider prevent a horse from moving to its utmost potential and detract from its beauty.

By contrast, if we ride with refinement and balance, the horse learns self-carriage. Self-carriage is when a horse carries itself in a collected frame. It does not need constant aids to remain collected. This is an ideal in alta escuela horsemanship and it is called learning to ride the horse in non-interference. This is what many of the great horsemen of Peru could do. The manifestation of this ideal is a collected horse and a rider who looks like he or she is doing nothing.

By contrast, many people collect a horse by driving it forward with leg aids and holding pressure on the bit. Using these contrary aids will often give a dramatic look but it is compression not collection. Collection should never be forced, instead it arises from teaching the horse how to use its body correctly and execute its movements like a dancer. When a dancer prepares to move he or she goes into position. The dancer concentrates, lifts the abdomen, tucks in his or her pelvis and remains poised and ready. Now, you can try an experiment. First, stand on your own two feet in a sloppy fashion. Then, pull in your belly and lift your core. Notice the differences in how you feel in both stances.

## IMPULSION

True collection also depends upon impulsion. "Impulsion is energy and a desire to move forward without being pushed, an inner exuberance emanating from a happy horse, not rushing."<sup>2</sup> Impulsion is an equestrian term that teaches us to understand the principles of energy. When discussing impulsion in horses we have to specify both the magnitude and the direction.

In equitation, the rider needs to establish an on-going dialogue with his or her horse so the horse understands how and when to use its energy. This means we first need to speak the same language. Over time we can learn to specify to the horse if we want its energy to be used for velocity, acceleration, upward elevation, etc. To reach this level of specificity and finesse, takes a great deal of communication with the horse and it is achieved by feel and tact, not technique.

Energy from the horse needs to be regulated when gaiting so it can be used in a variety of ways. A dead horse without impulsion (brio) not only lacks presence but also will be unable to gait like a clock. A horse with too much energy that rushes will not achieve the kind of advance (ground covering ability) that it could be capable of if it learned to stop being so frenetic. So we need to gain a sense of how much steam the horse will need to use at a given time.

Brio is what gives our horses the perfect blend of spirit and tractability. A horse with brio gives more freely of its energy and wants to channel its energy appropriately for the sake of gaining cooperation with its rider. A horse with brio gives its heart and uses its mind.

As the horse becomes increasingly joyful it can overcome many conformational flaws and/or physical limitations. Therefore, when you understand the intricate interplay between collection and impulsion, you can transform your Peruvian Horse. By mastering some of these basic principles our horses transform into "well oiled" athletes. Discipline evolves into art.

## IN CLOSING

We have great respect for Peruvian tradition and in no way advocate defecting from it. However, we hope breeders and owners will expand their training and riding repertoire as well as skill. This will not only attract new people into our breed and give us greater credibility in the equestrian community but it will also help strengthen our horses. Many believe that the Peruvian Horse is weak: we do not. We have discovered through our use of dressage for the gaited horse that many of the current problems with regard to lameness and weakness are not just a result of poor conformation and breeding practices, but stem from inadequate philosophies, methods and applications of training and riding.

Our horses can execute all gaits if the rider desires. Moreover, they can learn shoulder in, haunches in, levade, pirouette, Spanish walk, half pass and piaffe. "If the horse is willing, intelligent and well-gaited, these high school maneuvers will not interfere in their ability to always return to their inherited natural gait, the paso llano or sobreandando... Again what each horse is capable of learning is individual depending upon their mental attitudes, strength, conformation, brio and breeding."<sup>3</sup>

## FOOTNOTES

1. Nuno Oliveira, Reflections on the Equestrian Art Translated by Phyllis Field (London, J.A. Allen, 1976), 17.
2. Adele McCormick, Ph.D. Caballo Magazine, Article A Clinic of Dressage and Equitation (Volume 5, Number 39, 1992), 214.
3. Adele McCormick, Ph.D. Caballo Magazine, Article A Clinic of Dressage and Equitation (Volume 5, Number 39, 1992), 215.

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Drs. McCormicks are psychotherapists by profession and have combined this with their passion for horses. Over and above studying the equestrian arts from world renowned ecuyers such as Dominique Barbier, Jean-Claude Racinet and Jean-Philippe Giacomini, Drs. McCormick have applied much of their wisdom to their work with horses. The Drs. are authors of two groundbreaking books: HORSE SENSE AND THE HUMAN HEART and HORSES AND THE MYSTICAL PATH. They also are directors of a non-profit organization called The Institute for Conscious Awareness for Human Development and Transformation.

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