Manolo Mendez-Training for Wellness™

Clinic Report Austria, May 26th & 27th 2018 Vienna

written by Sonja Gawlas

On 26th and 27th of May we had the pleasure to have Manolo Mendez for the first time teaching in Lower Austria, close to Vienna at the beautiful and spacious Equestrian Center Kreuttal. We are grateful to the owners Conny and Niki Hausammann, who generously offered their huge riding arena, prepared the ground excellently and made sure that this event was such a great success. Thank you Conny and Niki <3

We would like to say thank you to our caterer from Stadtwirtshaus Wolkersdorf, who provided us with many different delicious meals for lunch: Thank You Konstanze ☺





Left: Reiterzentrum Kreuttal's beautiful outdoor arena and their two indoor arenas
Right: Manolo Mendez focused on horse's well-being

We had three riding instructors, one professional rider, one vet and two amateurs riding at our clinic. The level of horses and riders was excellent to work with for Manolo. We had a variety of different breeds of horses, disciplines and training level, which gave Manolo an excellent opportunity to teach his Training for Wellness™ Method to the riders and auditors.

In the morning we started out with Nora, a riding instructor from Germany, who has lived in Austria since coming to the Veterinary University of Vienna to study equine science. Nora came with her 13-year old Hannoveran mare Hannah Arendt, whom she has known since she was a foal. The mare was brought to Austria when she was three years old and Nora has trained her from the very beginning. Today, Nora and Hannah compete together at FEI Grand Prix level. Hannah was ready to work and Nora and Manolo were able to focus on canter pirouettes and piaffe-passage movements and transitions from the saddle.
In the past, Hannah has struggled with her balance from time to time and Manolo advised Nora to focus more on straightness and let the movement develop from the hindlegs. We had the pleasure to watch an entirely relaxed ride and the highlight was watching lovely canter pirouettes done with great ease and seeming effortlessness from horse and rider but at first, Manolo had to switch training strategy, because his first approach did not work entirely for Hannah. When Manolo finds that the "usual" approach does not work for a horse, he changes his strategy instead of insisting. Insisting would only create resistance and frustration in the horse. Manolo stated that when training, the rider must meet the horse at the level of comprehension and fitness it is at - the horse cannot meet the rider's expectations if he has not been prepared physically and mentally - so the rider has to prepare the horse slowly for what is asked- "little by little, step by step"- one exercise fosters

another and each builds the basis for the next more advanced move. It is the trainer's and the rider's responsibility to ensure, that the horse understands what is asked in the moment.

To improve the passage, Manolo helped Hannah a bit from the ground using his bamboos. He guided the mare towards a better understanding of what movement was expected of her. The little mare liked this exercise a lot and took it as an opportunity to show impressive steps with a lot of suspension. Manolo made sure to ask only for a few steps of passage and follow them with a nice relaxed forward trot to keep Hannah motivated and prevent her from tiring. Her rider, Nora later told me that she was very happy with her lessons. To her, Manolo's training for wellness approach is easy to follow and to continue at home. Nora contacted me after the clinic to say that she had ridden the most beautiful flying changes on every stride, when she trained the next day at home.







Photo Credit Carina Grosch

Brigitte was the second rider and introduced her daughter's stunning Dutch stallion Romanov's Touch FH. Romanov's Touch is now seven years old, and his skeleton is still not fully mature. Riding a young horse too much and too early in a bad posture can be detrimental to his/her body. Romanov's Touch was lucky enough to have owners who take things easy and give him the time he needs to fully develop. Manolo reminded the audience to:

- **Keep no horse**- no matter what age- **in a fixed posture for too long**
- Remember to **vary the gaits frequently**. Do not ride just one walk/trot/canter, but ride gaits within gaits. For example, a walk can be a working walk, medium walk, lengthened walk, extended walk, half steps, collected walk, etc..work within what the horse is fit enough and trained enough for.

He compared the training of a young horse with ballet dancing for children- no one would ever expect a child to do the splits without having been properly and progressively conditioned physically over time. Not preparing the child would result in severe injury. Manolo recommended that this young stallion be worked with his eyes level with a point between his point of hip and his stifle, with his nose in front of the vertical and an open angle between his head and neck. This posture encourages fluid movement, good breathing and active relaxation. This young horse still has to learn how to move without bracing, learn how to move his entire body without getting stiff and tense while keeping his balance under the rider. When he is more confident, and moving relaxed and balanced all the time on straight lines and on big circles, his riders will be able to introduce a little more collection to his training for a few steps and then allow him to stretch again, before he tires.

This posture is good for all horses to warm up and in between moments of collection. It ensures that the muscles, tendons, ligaments, joints and other vital organs not damaged, have enough blood supply and oxygen and maintain their function. It is vital for muscles to function properly that they alternate between contraction and relaxation. When horses are asked to work in a constant or semi-constant state of tension, it tires the body and eventually leads to soreness, pain and lameness.







Manolo leads Brigitte's hand to feel areas of muscle tension.
Photo Credit: Laura Smidt

Christa, our third rider came with her 8-year old cruzado stallion Foguete. The stallion was a bit nervous in the beginning and had difficulties stepping into the bit in a relaxed manner. Manolo recommended that Christa asks Foguete to lower his neck a little bit, so that the horse's eyes were somewhere between the point of hip and the stifle. Long term this posture helps to keep the horse's body sound: the parotid glands (salivary glands) are not compressed, the eyes and brain are properly oxygenated, the cervical and the thoracic spine does not get jammed and arthritic. In the beginning, Foguete was rushing a little bit too much in canter, but as he slowly relaxed, straightened and was able to step more into the bit, his strides got longer. The stallion had difficulties in the flying changes,

but this improved a lot with more relaxation and straightness. Manolo did a little bit of Piaffe in hands, to help restore Foguete's diagonal pairing.




Left: Manolo demonstrating the desirable posture of the head and the neck in between minor moments of collection. Photo Credit: Laura Smidt

Gabriela, our fourth rider, came with her Sandro Hit 11-year old gelding, Stereo Love. Stereo Love is frequently nervous and anxious, and it is therefore difficult to show his talent fully. On day 1, Manolo did a little bit of bodywork with him, to make him feel safe. He released a lot of his tension. Thereafter, Gabriela and Stereo Love worked on straight lines and big circles in a forward down and out position alternating with shoulder-in and travers with a flying change asked here and there. All in all, the work was designed to keep him relaxed and confident so the pair could end their lesson very relaxed with Stereo Love willing and happy to come back into the arena the next day. On day 2, Stereo Love came into the arena much more relaxed and comfortable with his rider and the clinic situation. After a ridden warm up, Manolo worked with him in-hand to continue releasing tension in his back and his psoas muscles, which are usually very tight in horses (and humans!) experiencing fear, anxiety and relaxation issues. Manolo closed his bodywork session with Stereo Love with a heart-melting companionable walk with this previously anxious and difficult horse. Gabriela asked Manolo to show her some of the bodywork so she could continue at home.

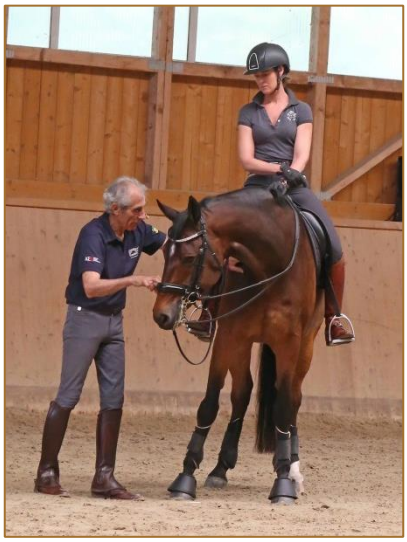



Photo Credit: Laura Smidt

Photo Credit:Carina Grosch



After lunch, we had Dominik and his 15-year old Hannoveran mare Wanda. Wanda came to Dominik seven years ago as not ridable. She used to rear and refuse to cooperate. Over time, Dominik was able to gain the sensitive mare's trust and today she is a very willing horse, but she has some difficulties to let go of the old patterns of muscle tension from her previous life. Manolo worked on her buried tension. Dominik has studied with other well-known trainers in the past and he wanted to know more about Manolo's way and work on improving his long-reining skills. Dominik showed us a little bit of his long-rein work in walk, trot and canter. Manolo and Dominik then worked together on Piaffe and Passage movements and transitions and on Sunday they even worked on some Levades.









Photo Credit: Laura Smidt



Photo Credit: Carina Grosch

Stephanie, our sixth rider, brought her 17-year old Icelandic gelding Gjuki to train with Manolo. Manolo suggested they work on big straight lines and circles and changes of lead to improve Gjuki's suppleness in the hindlegs. After a visible improvement, Manolo used his bamboos to help Gjuki with passage steps which he alternated with an easy, gentle, forward trot. On the second day, Stephanie showed Manolo her way of working at Liberty with Gjuki and Manolo showed her how to work with Gjuki to help him be straighter when performing in this manner.







Upper right: work in progress- transitions from trot to passage
Lower: Manolo working on passage at Liberty
Photo Credit: Carina Grosch

Leona, our riding vet, asked Manolo to work in hands with her 10-year old Arabian stallion TA Markomi in her first lesson on Saturday. Manolo worked him in-hand on straight lines and circles of varying sizes. He asked for a little shoulder-in here and there, to assess Markomi's ability to bend and to watch his footfalls. Thereafter, Manolo did bodywork to release tension and blockages. On Sunday, Leona rode Markomi, who has a little tendency to avoid the bit. Manolo asked the rider to bridge the reins to make the contact more even and get better control of the flexion- Markomi responded nicely with a more relaxed forward, down and out head and neck posture than before. To further improve his relaxation and head posture, Manolo pulled the reins directly through the sides of the bit, instead of attaching them to the end of the shanks, and Markomi changed into a different horse. Sadly, Leona has to use a bit with shanks when she competes in reining disciplines.








Photo Credit: Carina Grosch

Our last horse on Saturday was Rudolf, a 9-year old Austrian warmblood, who came to Brigitte's family to gain more confidence and relaxation and to maybe find a new home eventually.

He was very expensive as a young horse and went through several trainer's hands including training in Germany only to come back to Austria broken, nervous, anxious and distrustful towards men.

Rudolf could not be lunged in the past, because he would just burst and run. Manolo decided to work in-hand with him to foster some trust and later lunge him. Rudolf was scared of Manolo and the bamboo. Manolo carefully introduced himself and the bamboo, to show him that there was no need to worry. Manolo explained that it is important to allow an anxious horse to move, so that he does not feel trapped in the situation and does not burst suddenly. Slowly and carefully, Manolo started touching Rudolf with the bamboo and let him walk at the same time. They frequently stopped and Manolo gave a pat, let Rudolf process the situation and then continued. It is important to give anxious horses the time they need to process the situation and new input. Other work can only start when the horse is relaxed and no longer anxious of the handler and the equipment. At the end of the lesson Rudolf followed Manolo trustful and relaxed. He obviously found a new friend.

On Sunday, Brigitte brought Malcolm, her daughter's 14-year old pony, to train with Manolo. They warmed up with a little forward down and out work and worked on shoulder-in and travers. Manolo explained the importance of correct line management, when training lateral work. He explained how much difference it makes to the horse if the rider knows when to start a half-pass after making a turn: the circle helps to set up the flexion for the half pass to move fluidly from the circle into the half pass. If the rider begins the half pass too early in the turn, the horse's hind-leg is blocked. It is easier for the horse to do a half-pass after the turn is completed.

To sum it up: we had fantastic horses and riders, who came with very different demands and training levels to work with Manolo. The quality of horses was really good and they were all in good condition- none of them had severe issues, bodywork was only added on top, to make the horses even more elastic. The riders cooperated excellently and have shown to be very dedicated and eager to learn from Manolo. Auditors were able to see Manolo's Training for Wellness™ approach with a variety of different breeds, training levels and how to deal with anxiety in horses. Manolo worked on the long lines his way as well as helped the riders from the ground to introduce or improve Piaffe and Passage. It was very pleasant to have horse-professionals riding and auditing, as this serves to spread Manolo's knowledge to their pupils as well. For educational purpose, it is essential to have dedicated amateurs as well, because they are the ones who choose their horse's trainers. We are very happy, that so many people- professionals and amateurs- came to learn more about healthy training.

I want to say a heartfelt **THANK YOU ALL** for coming!
You have been a lovely team (riders and auditors) to work with <3