Manolo Mendez

Some Thoughts on Working In-Hand

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By Manolo Mendez, Specialist of In-hand and Classical Equitation

with Caroline Larrouilh

In-hand work is an integral part of my training, one that I use it with every horse, from green to Grand Prix, as it prepares and eases them into the demands of ridden work. I use in-hand first to build a correct foundation and then to help each horse progress along in his daily training, confirming the basics, working on balance and rhythm and introducing or refining movements.

I find that it is a challenging but greatly rewarding way to gain insights into our horses' minds and bodies and create a better working relationship with them.

Traditionally, in-hand work is used to teach Haute Ecole and piaffe and passage but I use it from the first moment a horse begins its training with me. I work in-hand with the young horse to teach him how to use his body properly so he can develop into a confident, strong, supple, and balanced horse. I help the horse build confidence and trust in himself and in me, and at the same time teach him balance and rhythm.

Good in-hand work requires great care on our part to exercise a sensitivity that we may not be able to display in our riding. It requires fitness and a mix of awareness, feel and timing.

Awareness, because we need the ability to move swiftly and with accuracy, to mirror with our body what we are trying to create in the horse. We must know how and where to position ourselves to help the horse bend, halt, move forward, etc. We must be able to adjust our position quickly and smoothly as we watch the horse move and react to our requests.

Feel, for how to shape the horse at his stage of training based on his conformation and history, asking neither too much nor too little, knowing what is good for each individual horse, what healthy postures, rhythm and angles look like.

Timing, because the handler must know when to influence the horse's movement and posture to be effective, and as importantly when not to ask based not only on where the horse's legs and body are positioned with each stride, but also where he is mentally.

Awareness, feel and timing are also about being able to gage if the horse has absorbed the lesson and is ready for another request, or if he needs more time, a break, or a different exercise altogether.

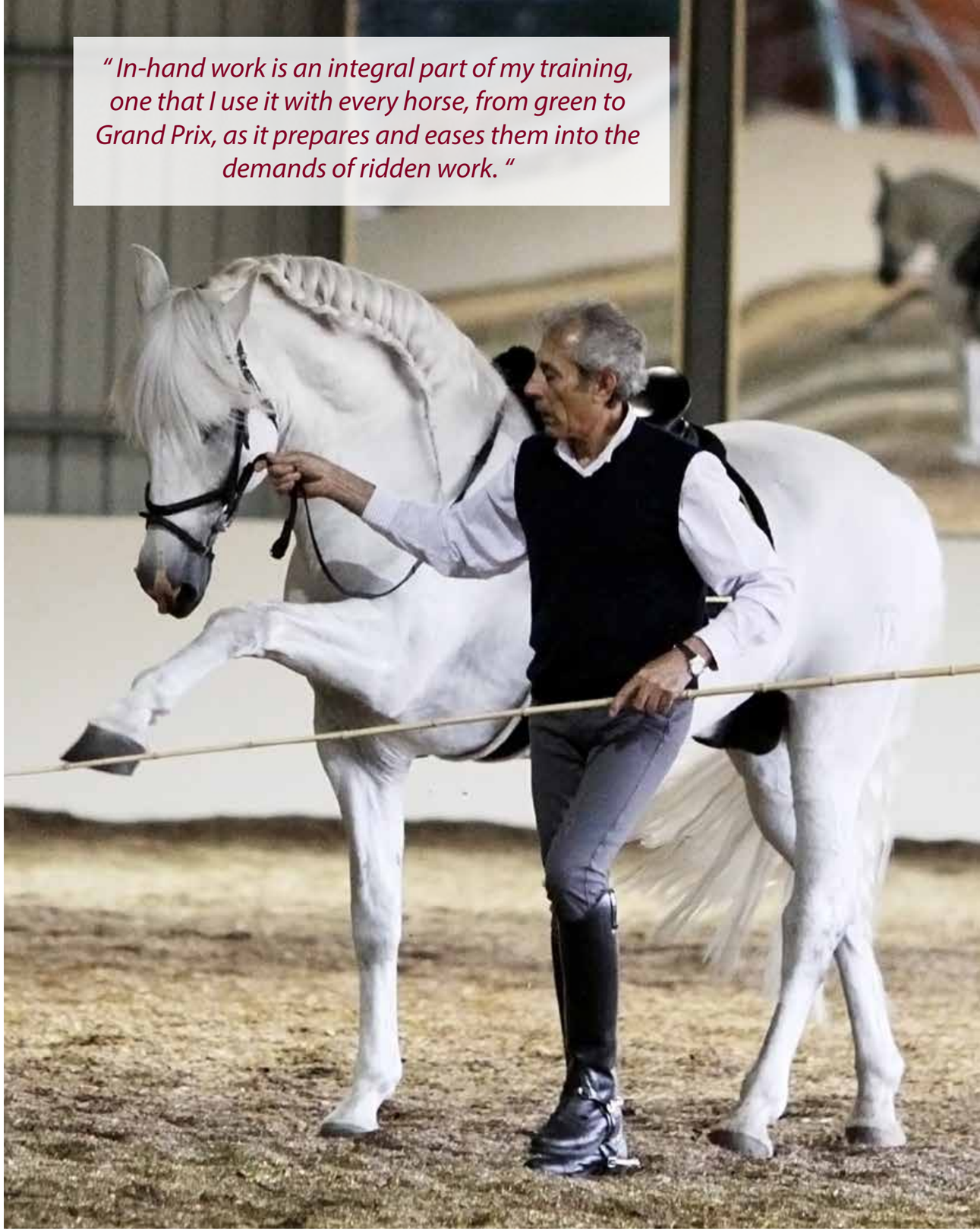
We need to use our feel and awareness to discern if a horse is being disobedient or if he is not understanding us. I find in most cases horses really try to figure things out. If they do not, it is often because they are afraid, do not understand, or are being asked something that they are not physically or mentally ready for. We should not punish the horse for these reasons; instead we need to ask ourselves whether something we are doing is creating the incorrect response we are seeing and how else to help the horse.

We should not respond abruptly or brutally as we learn this work and are challenged with putting all the elements together. The cavesson handled incorrectly can be very severe and as importantly, in-hand work is about teaching and building the horse's confidence and good will toward working with us. Forcing the horse destroys his desire to work and his trust and confidence in himself and in us.

Hard hands, bad timing, pushing too hard or punishing the horse without cause in-hand (also under saddle!) can destroy his rhythm and pull him off balance creating

Manolo Mendez was the first Head Rider, and one of six founding members of the Royal Andalusian School of Equestrian Art. Based in Jerez, Spain, the school is one of the four classical schools which also include the Cadre Noir in Saumur, the Spanish Riding School in Vienna and the Portuguese School of Equestrian Art in Lisbon. A master horseman with over forty years of experience spanning classical dressage, doma vaquera and jumping, Manolo is dedicated to a soft, sympathetic and thorough training method which prepares horses physically and psychologically for each stage of training from training to Grand Prix and Haute Ecole. For more information and more articles visit: www.manolomendezdressage.com

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Photo descriptions

Pic 1 (previous page) In hand work is great to prepare the horse for under saddle work. Here Manolo is practicing Spanish walk in hand. Manolo is very careful that Dinamico steps forward as he lifts his foreleg and is not stuck behind.

2. Manolo asked Joe to trot and is taking a moment to observe him to decide his next step. Without any pressure, he is positioning Joe on a circle, making sure he has a correct bend/flexion through his body. A correct bend/flexion means that there should be a natural arc from his poll to his tail otherwise the horse is crooked. Manolo is holding and directing the lunge line in his right hand and holding the bamboo in his left hand keeping it behind Joe's hind feet but not driving it (at this moment). He safely holds the extra lunge line properly looped in his left hand.

3. To get Joe to use himself a little better Manolo just touched his inside hind leg above the hock gently with the bamboo he holds in his left hand. With his right hand he is taking a little more contact on the lunge line and asking for a little more bend in Joe's body. At the same time, Manolo is making sure he is walking forward and stepping in the same direction of travel as Joe to help him maintain his natural forward moving rhythm.

4. Learning to work on three tracks. While Manolo is asking for flexion with his left hand at the cavesson, his right hand and arm is using the bamboo to help Joe bend and travel on three tracks. Three track work is known for being an excellent tool to keep the horse's body compact without compromising the length of his neck. This is a method Manolo always uses, teaches and confirms before he asks for collected work under saddle. It is the beginning of teaching the horse to close the body that one day will lead to collection.

5. Manolo is influencing Clint's outside foreleg with the bamboo to activate the outside shoulder and leg and create more room for the horse to step underneath himself better with the inside hind. Note how lightly the lunge line is being held so as to encourage the horse to travel with a long, soft neck and an open throatlatch. 6. Manolo repeats the same exercise in the other direction making sure he is working Clint on both sides of his body. Note Manolo's position with the lungeline in his outside hand and the bamboo in his inside hand. Touching here and there to create cadence and activate the horse's body and muscle memory.

6. In the past, this horse has had very little in hand work if any. He is not carrying his neck as Manolo would like but he is beginning to learn to find his independent balance. With freedom in motion, his neck comes up a little for now but he remains soft overall. Manolo does not try and bring his neck down using the cavesson but focuses instead on building Clint's rhythm and activity by touching the bamboo to the front of Clint's inside foreleg. This will lead to his eventually arching his neck in a posture Manolo likes to see for this higher level of training.

7. Manolo repeats the same exercise in the other direction making sure he is working Clint on both sides of his body. Note Manolo's position with the lungeline in his outside hand and the bamboo in his inside hand. Touching here and there to create cadence and activate the horse's body and muscle memory.

"In-hand work is not about mechanically working the horse. It is not about lunging the horse around and around to tire him or repeating the same requests again and again whether the horse understands them or not... We need to be able to observe and analyze our horse's responses to the requests "




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Pic 8 (above) Clint is showing more lift in his withers and a little more arch in his neck.

Pic 9 (right) Here, Manolo has Buddy in an 8 to 9 meter circle to the right. He is positioned on the outside of the circle, the cavesson in his left hand and the bamboo in his right hand. He is carefully shaping and directing Buddy at a walk on the circle making sure there is no resistance. Here and there, Manolo will move from an 8 to 12 meter circle into a three tracks shoulder in/fore while keeping the horse moving forward and travelling out. When Buddy achieves this in a fluid, relaxed and soft manner, then Manolo will come back to the 8 meter circle and repeat the shoulder fore/in out to 12 meter. Manolo is always directing this movement step by step in a very soft, forward manner. This exercise in walk is an excellent way to help your horse understand what you are asking for in the beginning of teaching lateral movement under saddle.



In-Hand Work

We need to be able to observe and analyze our horse's responses to the requests we are making...

problems and remedial work for the handler. While in-hand work is a unique and very effective tool, it must be used correctly to help the horse or it can really harm it greatly.

In-hand work is not about mechanically working the horse. It is not about lunging the horse around and around to tire him or repeating the same requests again and again whether the horse understands them or not. If we want to make learning easy for the horse and help him to first develop straightness, rhythm, balance and confidence, and then learn lateral movements, introduce collection and eventually passage and piaffe, we have to really think about how we communicate with our horse.

We need to be able to observe and analyze our horse's responses to the requests we are making and be willing and able to modify our requests or change them so that our horse understands what we are asking. By being calm, observant, and flexible we create conditions for success, not stress and failure.

Being successful in-hand will depend on a few factors: what training the horse has had before beginning this work; if any, his conditioning; and his understanding of how and what we are trying to communicate to him. We want to work so that the horse is not defensive or afraid, and learns to accept, listen, and respond quietly to our requests.

Our success in-hand also depends greatly on our ability to pay close attention to the horse's body, his expressions and movements, and how he responds to our own motions, our requests.

I do not work in-hand from the bridle. Instead, I only work in-hand with a cavesson. I prefer a completely adjustable, light, Spanish cavesson rather than one of the more cumbersome, heavier models from Germany and Austria. The cavesson I use has adjustable poll, jaw and nose straps and a single buckle (lighter than three buckles) on a padded noseband. It can comfortably fit any horse I meet during lessons and clinics, whether it has a small, medium or huge head.

I am often asked why I recommend using a cavesson rather than work from the bridle. In my experience, I have found that in insensitive or novice hands, working from the bit can create problems with incorrect flexions and instill fear or resistance in the horse who is worried about his mouth.

In addition, I have found that working with a Spanish cavesson or "serrata" gives the handler more flexibility and the horses moves with greater enthusiasm and freedom of movement without a bridle. Since I want the horse to move freely and find his independent balance without being "framed" or held together by auxiliary aids, the cavesson is a better choice for my goals. I never use side reins for the same reason.

How to get the most out of beginning in-hand work: keeping the horse calm and accepting.

Before I introduce in-hand work and different exercises, my horse needs to already understand how to move freely and softly in walk, trot and canter both directions on the lunge line. He also needs to have an understanding of basic balance, rhythm and correct flexion/bending. I do not begin work in-hand until I have this understanding in place.

Once my horse is comfortable being lunged on a circle, I can use the track (wall) to keep my horse straight and introduce him to having different parts of his body mobilized with a bamboo pole for in-hand work.

For my bamboo pole, I use a simple, straight garden-variety bamboo that has been allowed to dry so that it is very light. I like to have different lengths available, 6ft, 8ft, 12ft. The diameter is usually about the size of my index finger at the beginning which is the part I hold. I touch the horse with the tip part of the bamboo which is very thin and very light. I pay special attention to the bamboos being straight and having no asperities.



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As a result of frequent in hand work Brolga is not intimidated by Manolo working with a bamboo and a cane at the same time He is working on piaffe with his owner calmly and willingly.

As I introduce work in-hand, I keep things very simple. I begin at the halt by touching one leg with my bamboo. Then I ask the horse to walk on, halt again and I touch another leg. Then I repeat the walk, halt and touch another leg routine until the horse responds calmly and without fear or concern.

I want to desensitize the horse to having his legs touched by my bamboo, take away his fear and teach him that when I touch him a certain way, I am asking for a specific reaction. I may be asking him to engage this or that leg a little bit more or step up or back. If I place the bamboo in front of his front or hind feet, I may be asking him to confidently touch it with his hoof with each stride and create his own rhythm. Before any of this can happen, the horse must be acclimated to the bamboo.

My goal is to touch all four legs with the bamboo at the halt as well as introduce it to different areas of the horse's body: his neck, chest, sides, belly, croup, down his hindquarters, etc. I can rub him with the bamboo so that it feels good and stand next to him with my arm over his back, moving the bamboo around the side of his body, by his feet, neck, and face until he is comfortable. I do not force him to stand, I take my time and I am quietly confident so my horse picks up his cue from my lack of concern.

If my horse begins to feel pressured by the boundary of the wall, I can take him back to the middle of the arena where he has learned to feel confident with previous lunging lessons.

I work the horse to the left and to the right. I never know how my horse is going to respond day to day, so I test the waters and I am always observant of his responses while working on the circle and when using the wall to keep him straight.

How does he feel today? Sluggish or forward? Is he moving evenly? Is he crooked? Tense? Reactive? You can work your horse for a little bit on a straight line then come back to a halt and touch one leg gently. If the horse responds ever so slightly by moving his leg - reward, praise, give a pat. Repeat, walk on, halt, and touch the other leg. If he responds, reward. At this point, you only care that the horse is responding by moving his leg calmly; the direction does not matter.

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I have observed many horses responses and generally they will accept this process as it is short and there is no pressure. From there I go on to add trot to the routine. I ask the horse to trot, then walk, then halt. I touch each leg in turn at the halt and so on.

It is important to use the same, consistent sequence to instill understanding and confidence in the horse. If we ask straight away for the trot and try to touch our horse with the bamboo, he will run away from it and our session will achieve nothing. We must go on slowly and with great calm and focus.

It is very important to go backward and forward with these exercises in walk and trot to help the horse understand what it is that we are asking.

As we are performing these exercises we are looking for softness throughout the body and a correct posture. This is the key to all good in-hand training. To have good posture and a soft, tension free horse we must create regularity, balance and harmony in the body of the horse so that the horse can get underneath himself and move his shoulders freely when we ask for a response by tapping the hind legs. When his neck is long, the horse will have plenty of room to move forward and, most importantly, be able to move with softness. Softness is defined by a lack of tension or bracing and relaxed, bouncy muscles.

The horse has to be able to use his neck for balance and have room to move underneath himself, which cannot happen if the neck is too short. If we keep the horse too short in front then the horse will travel on his shoulders and be crooked. He will not find his own independent balance and rhythm.

If this happens even just a little bit it will create big problems for us when we train transitions. As I mentioned earlier, correct posture from the beginning is the key to developing a strong, supple and balanced horse.

Problems that occur when riding can and will occur when training in-hand because when a horse is being a little lazy with one leg, or is crooked, or is not equally strong on both sides of his body. The result can be seen and felt in-hand as well as under saddle.

For example, what do we do if a horse is not moving evenly and does not step under his body with his left hind leg exactly the same way and distance as he does with his right hind leg?

If we observe the horse carefully, we will notice that the stride of the left hind leg is smaller than the one of the right hind leg, and as a consequence the horse steps shorter on his right shoulder because whatever the hind leg does, so does the opposite diagonal shoulder. So when we address the horse's left hind leg, we will also address the restrictions in the right shoulder and benefit the whole horse.

With in-hand work we can very precisely

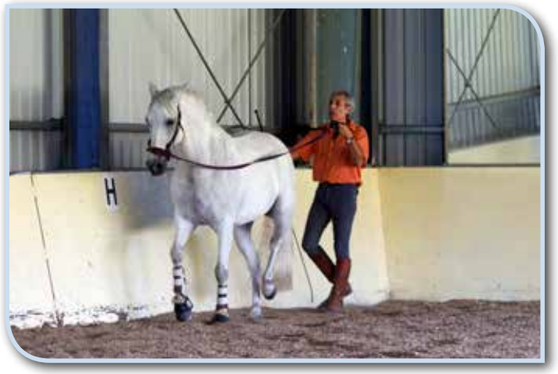
Some thoughts on working in-hand.

In-hand is patient work

that requires we be observant and flexible.

influence any leg we want and ask it to step up a little more actively. To help the horse step up with his left hind leg a little more actively to match his right hind leg, we ask him to travel on a straight line and just as the left hind leg is moving off the ground, we can gently touch it from behind between the pastern and the hock. We observe the results and that helps us figure out if we asked at the right time, too early or too late, too hard or not enough - and it helps us refine our feel and timing.

To help the horse develop in a healthy way, it is very important to observe what is happening in his body. To look at his muscles development, in motion and at a standstill and note asymmetries: what side of his body is more developed, what shoulder, what side of the croup, what hind quarter when you lift the tail, what pectoral or poll muscles, etc. These differences are a map that tells us how the horse is developing and gives us indications about problems we may be experiencing or will experience in the future.



In-hand is patient work that requires we be observant and flexible. Sometimes while everything looks like it is going well we may see something that is not quite right and we have to think about how we can help the horse succeed.

What if when we begin the piaffe work we find that the hind legs are responding well but the front legs are not traveling in the same way as the hind legs? The horse is tensing his neck and shoulders and his body is not working as a harmonious whole but working mechanically in fits and starts. We have to reward the horse a lot for what he is doing right because learning piaffe is hard work and he is articulating and bending his hind legs very well but we also need to teach him to use his front legs in sync with his hind legs. So what should we do?

To help him learn to work as a fluid whole and to free him of tension instead of repeating the same requests again and again, I stop schooling the piaffe and bring the horse to the centre of the arena. As I mentioned earlier, for the horse to work in balance evenly and with regularity, we need to keep the horse's body soft and tension free so that his topline his elastic and he can accommodate the bend in the body, the coiling of the loin and the lowering of the haunches that the piaffe requires.

Knowing this, I ask him gently to lower his neck and head and I massage the base of his neck where it meets the shoulder to see if he will release the tension he holds there. I can also ask him to walk and then trot around me on an 8 to 12m circle (I use the size circle that works best for my horse, I do not force him on a smaller circle then he is comfortable traveling) and observe carefully how he is using his body to the left and then the right. I do not rush him off his feet but look for rhythm, softness and a correct flexion or bending through the body. When I see him respond and soften I can resume teaching the piaffe.

We have to look at the whole body and make sure that every part of the horse is working in harmony.

When the neck gets too high or the neck gets too low or behind the vertical, the horse is telling us that he does not understand how to carry himself and does not know, or cannot find his balance using his neck. It reveals a weakness in the neck musculature.

Horses need to be encouraged to stretch the neck out (withers to poll) and compress the body (withers to dock of tail) shorter. If we shorten a horse from the poll to the dock of the tail then the body will weaken over time and lose its grace and elegance. The horse will struggle to find his balance

Picture discription (above). Here Manolo is working with Brolga on piaffe using a different way to use the cavesson for in hand work. While the lunge line is looped around Brolga and both ends are attached to the nose buckle, Manolo is keeping the connection light and encouraging Brolga to stay soft and in front of the vertical.

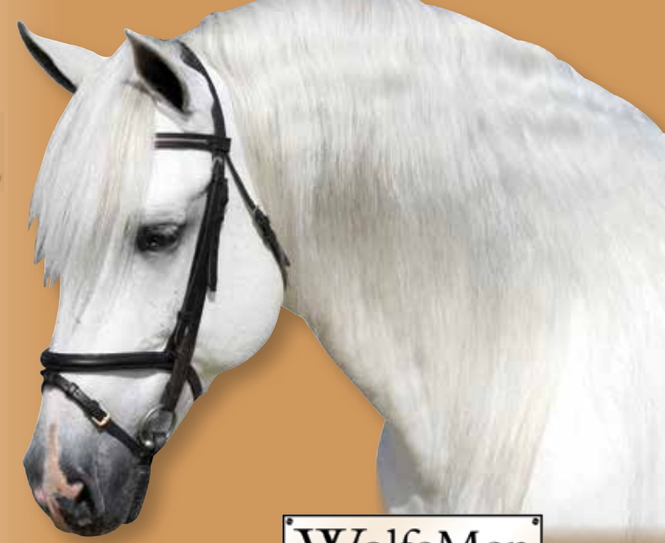
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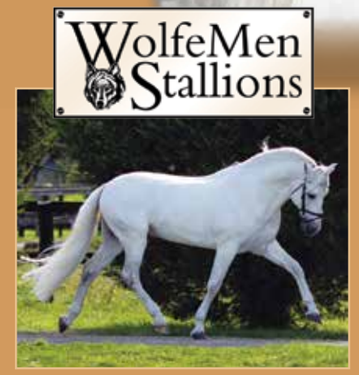
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and develop a bad posture - and we know bad postures create problems at every stage of the training.

To help keep the horse's neck long and his body short there are in-hand exercises I can use very much like exercises in ballet to create regularity, strength and suppleness. They yield better result than trying to fix these problems from the saddle.

I can encourage the horse to lengthen his neck by gently tapping the dock of his tail while he travels on a circle, ask him to lift his back by touching the base of his neck or his belly. I can trace circles in the sand vigorously with my bamboo parallel to his footfalls and ask him to move a little more forward so that his motion organizes his body for me and he stretches his neck to balance.

I can ask him for an easy shoulder fore around me on a circle at the walk or take him to the wall in shoulder-in letting his neck lengthen and his body shorten as he steps under his belly line. I can change direction by having him step around his quarters or do a quarter pirouette, taking each step slowly and deliberately and touch any leg as needed so that they step evenly, with correct timing and alignment.

I can ask him to trot on a straight line and play with where I place my bamboo in front of his front or hind feet so that he trots with more animation and arches his neck as his front end lifts off the ground. I can take a second bamboo and work on straight lines and influence his fore and hind feet, or place one on his chest as I work with his hind feet to slow down his progression down the wall.

There are more techniques available yet for those who become proficient at working in-hand. For example, both ends of the lunge line can be attached to the buckle of the cavesson and the horse can be "short-lined" with the handler walking or running behind the horse as he works on piaffe and passage. This requires the horse be well prepared and trusting of his handler.

Working in-hand, there is no end to how we can organize the horse's body to help improve or enhance his balance, rhythm and suppleness and prepare him for different movements under saddle. As importantly, in-hand work helps us develop the horse's confidence and attentiveness as his understanding of what we ask of him grows and he finds that we are fair, clear and precise.

By constantly observing and working to preserve the softness in our horses' bodies and minds, we can deepen the connection we have with them and make our training and companionship more efficient on the ground or under saddle.

In-hand work is at its best when it is not used to push or force results, but used instead to allow us to work in harmony together with our horses, and use the time spent together in this manner to understand our horses better and find ways to make it easier for us to work together under saddle.

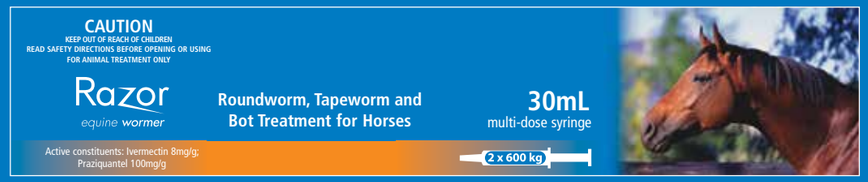
Pic 12 (above left) As a result, Dinamico under saddle is learning to perform Spanish Walk calmly and correctly.





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