

José with Ebano demonstrating a beautiful piaffe (Image by Downunder Photography).



TRAINING TIPS

The forgotten art of patience

Spanish-born **JOSÉ MENDEZ** began working horses in-hand as a boy. He learned, in great detail, how to teach them piaffe, passage, Spanish walk and long-reining, and generously shares his knowledge with us

After moving to Australia at the age of 19, José was selected for the Dressage World Cup in Canada in 1986 and went on to compete and win for Australia at multiple international Grand Prix events. He's a fully qualified Equestrian Australia Level 2 Dressage Coach and Coach Educator. An expert in horsemanship, José uses in-hand for both the early stages of training the young horse, as well as in teaching advanced horses the more complex movements. Here he discusses the art of in-hand, why it is so important and how to incorporate it into your training:

First steps

Using in-hand training when starting a young horse is paramount, he will learn so much before we even get on. You can educate the horse on many things, including how to move sideways, how to lower his neck, which is very important, and how to rein-back. I refer to this type of training as therapy to the body. It teaches the horse how to deal with his own body without being encumbered by the rider.

For in-hand work I have the horse tacked up in a saddle and a cavesson with a snaffle. The line is attached to the ring on the noseband, never the bit, so the training does not interfere with the horse's mouth. Many people get a horse, put a saddle on the back and a bit in the mouth. They take it into the round yard, get on and start working the horse. Then, because the horse is uneducated, when it does things like shoot forward, it gets a massive amount of pressure applied to the mouth, which can cause long-term damage and leave the horse feeling frightened and confused. The cavesson is a wonderful piece of equipment, it allows the horse to build up confidence through steady, kind, pain-free repetition, right from the start.

Creating a good mouth is the essence of creating a willing, confident horse. In the muscle at the back of the tongue, there is a small bone called the hyoid

Toby with shoulders fore to the long side. (Images by Mendez Equestrian Centre).



which connects the horse's tongue to the mouth. Incorrect use of the bit can permanently damage this bone, potentially leading to hyper-flexion, rearing, bolting and over-chewing the bit due to tension. When you work in-hand it creates submission, which keeps the mouth quiet, so the horse carries the bit with elegance and no tension.

Extra equipment

I put boots on the front legs for protection, especially during lateral work. The boots should cover only the cannon bone and never go down over the fetlock, otherwise they are too restrictive and can result in long-term damage to the tendons and joints.

I do not believe in gadgets and never use side reins. Outside of horses in performance, like in the Riding School

of Vienna, side reins are forbidden. I have seen too many horses die in them, at least four, because people do not know how to use them correctly. The horse gets the tongue over the bit, panics, then rears up and over, hitting the back of his head. Young horses have such delicate mouths, which side reins destroy. The mouth becomes hard and the horse difficult, he becomes overbent and learns to drop the shoulder.

There is so much technology available to us to learn about the body of the horse and how it works, that it's not necessary that any reasonable trainer should use gadgets. If a trainer has to use such devices, they should stop and take a look at themselves; perhaps they are not as good as they think. They need to go back to the drawing board

and learn more about horses. Gadgets are only a band-aid over the problem. There is only one training aid that may be beneficial if used properly and that is the chambon. It can have the advantage of encouraging the horse to go lower and open the gullet but should be used only for a short period of time, to bring the message across to the horse.

For lunging too I connect the line only to the cavesson. A lunging whip is not in my collection, instead, I use a long piece of bamboo, similar to what you would get from a gardening store. Bamboo acts as an extension of your arm. It enables you to tap your horse to encourage him forward, but being light and hollow, it is not painful for



José teaches Toby rotations on a circle using a bamboo rod as an extension of his arm. Bamboo is very light and is not painful for the horse when you make contact.

your horse when you make contact.

Training from the ground up

When training a young horse that may be a little bit difficult, spooky or cold-backed, in-hand work is beneficial because it engages the brain. You do small circles, to the left and to the right and some rein-back. This is a great warm up and, after ten minutes or so, you can get on without needing to lunge the horse. Lunging is not to take energy out of the horse, lunging is for observing and learning about his body. Are his legs stepping under? Which leg steps higher? How does he like to carry his head and neck? The point is to make an assessment, to help enable you to improve the horse once in the saddle.

When teaching higher movements to an experienced horse, like piaffe and passage, working from the ground makes the process much easier. You can see what the legs are doing and what leg to touch or not touch. With correct fundamentals there are less mistakes and you create better quality horses.

Red apples taste better

When I ask people ‘what is the aim of dressage?’, they say ‘to get the horse to do this and do that’, but no, the aim of dressage is to create an understanding between the horse and rider. This enables the horse to execute any exercise you want, with suppleness, confidence, and minimal tension. Ninety per cent of the top dressage riders in the world don’t follow this. They jam the horse up into a too-tight frame but, because they are rewarded by the judges, they continue to do so. Some horses break down from being subjected to too much pressure too early.

One or two out of every ten horses may be able to cope with this type of training, but what does that mean for the other eight? If you train them with a longer neck and the correct frame, out of ten horses, you will have almost one hundred per cent positive results. All horses are born the same and I’ve never

seen a 'no-good horse', but I have seen a lot of horses that people have made bad.

More time should be taken at the start of the horse's training, to promote longevity. It does not mean the whole process is slower, it means it takes the right amount of time. I sometimes ask people what they would do if they picked an apple from the tree and it was still a bit green and tasted bitter. They usually say they would throw it away and pick another. And if the next apple tasted the same? Then they would throw that one away too and go pick yet another. But all those apples are still green! If it were me, I would wait another one, two or even three weeks, until they became red, ripe, sweet and wonderful! The same thing applies to horses, if it is still green, you need patience: just wait, give it time.

Final thoughts

My philosophy is A.S.K:

A = Appreciation: You must appreciate the fact the horse has even let you on his back, he does not have to do anything more special than that to be appreciated.

S = Sincerity: Be sincere with the horse, if he does something wrong, the level of punishment should be gentle, when the horse does something right remember to tell him.

K = Kindness: Be kind in every aspect of dealing with your horse. Be careful how you punish him, you may need only to raise your voice, or 'tap tap tap' with the whip, rather than hit him. The moment he does something good let him know!

We must give the horse what he needs to make a good partnership. After all, we are riding a living being - it's not all about us. If you listen to your horse, he will be the best teacher you will ever have.

Interested in learning more?

Contact the Mendez Equestrian Centre on 02 4841 0069, or email mendezeqcentre@bigpond.com.



José working on a piaffe with Toby in-hand. It's easier to see and reward or correct as required from the ground, when you can see what your horse's legs are doing.