

The Iberian Horse and the History of Dressage

By Sarah Gately-Wilson

The Iberian is one of the oldest breeds of horse, dating as far back as 17,000 BC by engravings and cave paintings. The Iberian is the foundation sire of many of today's dressage horses, including the Lipizzaner, Thoroughbred, and most of our warmbloods. Originally, the Iberian was bred to be a war horse, but during the Renaissance, times were peaceful and the horses were used for new disciplines. The Iberian exhibited natural ability to collect and the agility and animation essential for high school movements and the airs above the ground. Their abilities made them a favorite for dressage, which became the preferred discipline of riding among nobility.



George Hamilton's (1672-1737) portrayal of the Spanish horse shows his short back, arched neck, and strong sturdy body.

During the Renaissance horsemanship became a highly polished art. In the early 1400s, King Duarte I of Portugal founded the Academy of Equestrian Art. The Iberian horse was no longer a vehicle of war. In 1603 King James I observed, "the honourablest and most commendable games that ye can use are on horseback, for it becommeth a Prince better than any other man to be a fair and good horseman." Previously, the Iberian had been carefully bred and schooled to reflect military might. Kings and nobleman preferred a magnificent mount and with the monarch in the lead, fortunes were spent to build beautiful royal stables and stud farms and provide the court with these mighty chargers. Military riding academies were built for the purpose of training horse and rider for warfare. The airs above the ground, such as the capriole, are used for evasion; the levade for firing at a vantage point, and the piaffe for keeping the horse awake and ready. Haute Ecole (high school) training and movements came to be revered by its participants and the Spanish horse's unparalleled capabilities made him the heart of the discipline. The best-known school was, of course, the Spanish Riding School. It originated in Italy but was later moved to Vienna. Iberians were imported into Austria for the school and were bred to local horses. Their descendants, the Lipizzans, are still used in the school today.

At the beginning of the 1600s, horses were being trained to achieve harmony and lightness and the riders were using primarily weight aids, minimal hands, soft bits and no spurs. With this in mind, the riders often chose the Iberian horse as their mount. In 1556, Thomas Blundeville of England commented “The horse of Spain is finely made, both head, body and legs, and very seemly to the eye and for his making lightness and swiftness withall, he is very much esteemed, and especially of noble men.” In 1600, Salomon de la Broue, who would become instructor to the French king, stated, “Comparing the best horses, and considering which is most perfect, I would place the Spanish first.” The appreciation these leading equestrian figures had for the Spanish horse was shared by many others of the time, including the Duke of New Castle and Pluvinel. Later, Francois de la Gueriniere furthered dressage as an art, riding Spanish horses and changing the saddle to allow for more use of weight aids and the development of our modern leg position. He also introduced the shoulder-in, helping the horse to collect and engage his hindquarters.

All Authors have always shown a preference for the Spanish horse, considering it the best of all horses for high school dressage, due to its agility, its resilience and its rhythm. 1733, Francois de la Gueriniere

It wasn't until the early 1800's that equestrian sport changed dramatically. The Iberian horse fell out of favor as the kings no longer wanted an upright and collected mount, but rather sought a fast horse that would race and hunt over fences. The classical art of dressage as performed with the Iberian horse became obscure, except on the Iberian Peninsula and in some of the military schools, where it can still be found today.



The true art of classical dressage does not conform to any rulebook. Classical dressage training allows you to build on the individual strengths of each horse. It uses gymnastic exercises to improve on a horse's weaknesses and enhance their natural abilities. In training, a horse will show a stronger aptitude, for a certain air, and this will be the air that he is trained to perform. Seek the individual strength of each and bring out the best in the horse.