

Horse Human Harmony



Julia Alemany-Bird, a leading UK authority on Spanish horses and a Classical Riding instructor kindly takes time out of her busy schedule to share with us how she got into classical riding and why for her, the Spanish horse holds so much appeal. By Becci Harvey

Hi Julia, thanks for talking to us. Tell us, how did you get into horses?

I have been fascinated by horses and ponies from early childhood and although aged 4 when put on a donkey at a fair I screamed until I was taken off! I was desperate to have my own pony but was able to go to a local riding stables from the age of about seven, where my Mum would leave me with some sandwiches for the day to muck out, clean tack etc in return for the chance to ride the horses bareback to the fields after they had done their lessons.

And when did you get into Spanish horses?

In my early twenties I was due to work with some dressage horses in North Carolina in the USA but had a slight mishap with the American immigration authorities so did not get to go. With my

suitcase still packed I answered an advert in Horse & Hound and ended up on the island of Mallorca. I found myself half way up a mountain in sole charge of about 12 horses, 2 of which were Spanish horses. A cheeky little grey stallion called 'Nippy' was my first introduction to the breed and great fun!

Is that how you got into classical riding?

I was aware of classical riding when I worked for Joe Allen, The Horse book publisher as he published some classic texts but did not really think it would relate to me and my riding. All that changed a few years later in Mallorca. I fell in love with a little Spanish bull-fighting stallion called Gavilan but found although I had been riding for twenty years and had done everything I could

from pony club to hunting, BHS Eventing, Tetrathlon and county level showing, when I sat on him for the first time nothing worked. It made me reassess everything.



How does it differ to what most people consider to be 'conventional' riding?

I always say 'Classical riding' is 'good riding' in the sense that the basic principles that underpin it should relate to all riding. It

includes an awareness of the optimum weight distribution and balance of the horse which allows it to carry us as riders correctly without causing them damage or injury and the development of our own balance and self-carriage to work in harmony with the horse. Where it differs is in people's knowledge and practise of the gymnastic exercises such as shoulder-in and haunches-in. These are part of the basic foundation of a classical education and the basis of all collection.

So many years of owning, training and rehabilitating Andalusians has made you a bit of an expert, what for you makes them so special?

As a Spanish man once said to me the Spanish horse is the way it is because the Spanish people are the way they are! The Spanish have carefully selected certain mares and stallions from the sixteenth century to create the horse they wanted - a horse that could almost share the house with the family but when mounted with a sword in hand could go and do battle. A kind and noble character, intelligent and quick to learn but also brave. I have owned and ridden other breeds and loved them all but somehow the Spanish horse has captured my heart.

What advice would you give to someone thinking of buying one?

Take your time and research, research, research. Definitely ride some Spanish horses, ideally more than one as it will probably feel totally different to any other horse you have ridden. Don't be swayed by long, flowing manes and big almond shaped eyes! A graded, papered horse is that for a reason, it fits certain parameters of movement and bone structure and both its parents were graded as being of Spanish type and quality. Get



Gavilan, an ex bull-fighting horse who taught me so much

any horse properly vetted. Contact the British Association For The Pure Bred Spanish Horse for information. I also offer an impartial help and advice service and the opportunity to meet and handle two representatives of the breed, my stallion Bizarro and my gelding Yamao.

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You're also a Horse Assisted Educator, what does that mean?

Horse Assisted Educator means what 'it says on the tin' using horses to foster learning, where they are also the teachers! Just one example where we can learn from our interactions with horses is about our own emotions. The horses can help us to understand issues we might have with our own confidence or help us to work better with people as part of a team.

Who have been your biggest inspirations?

My biggest inspirations have been a lady called Tina, who first taught me to ride because she made it clear from the very start

that you had to listen to the horse and that most problems usually started with a misunderstanding of communication between me and the horse. Also my Spanish horse Gavilan who was an ex bull-fighting horse and very highly strung but an incredible personality, who taught me so much. Lastly a Portuguese classical master I had the pleasure of getting to know, Joao Trigueiros De Aragao - a real gentleman with a calm, quiet manner and beautiful riding but who was still open to new influences and ideas and who showed me that there is so much to learn and enjoy every day.

And finally, if you had to sum up your approach in three words what would it be?

Of course... Horse Human Harmony!

Julia is based in Friday Bridge near Wisbech and is available for classical instruction and independent advice relating to buying, owning and training Spanish horses across the UK. Visit www.alemany-bird.co.uk or call 01945 773508 for more information.

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