

October 2009 Beyond the Basics

Spanish Traditions of the Doma Vaquera-Part II

Many of you that have been following my articles in *Northwest Horse Source* over the years have come to realize that I am of the Doma Encantador, a to meet such fine Andalusian with Bettina come to realize on the knowledge to Espanol – the



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McHugh
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enamored by the Andalusian horse and the traditions Vaquera. I have had the good fortune to work with beautiful PRE stallion that lives in Halfway, Oregon, aspiring horsemen as Ami McHugh and her amazing stallions, and I have had inspirational conversations Drummond about this incredible breed. In all, I have a daily basis, that I have only scratched the surface of gained from the Spanish and his horse the Pure Raza Andalusian.

This month I'd like to discuss the use of the garrocha (*gaa-roach-a*), a 13-foot long bullfighting pole, to help all of us with our horsemanship skills. I am, by no means, an expert regarding the Doma Vaquera traditions, nor their applications. However, I have enjoyed the positive effects of their influence on my horsemanship skills, and frankly the fun of trying new things with all of my horses and clients! Seeing six women flowing around a circle, riding Quarterhorses or Warmbloods, balancing a 13-foot garrocha on their shoulder, is quite a site! This is perhaps a picture that would turn the stomach of a true 'Garrochista'. However, I have found in this ancient art form a wonderful instrument to improve everyone's horsemanship. No disrespect is intended towards the culture of the Pure Raza Espanol, the art form of using the garrocha, or this amazing source of Spanish horsemanship pride, in suggesting we could use the garrocha to assist *all* riders in our horsemanship skills. The recommendations below may horrify some traditionalists, but I have seen a completely new group of aspiring horsemen expand their skills, improve their posture, and gain a level of communication with their horses through the use of a garrocha-like pole. In the process, we have become exposed to a beautiful Spanish tradition and a high-level of respect has been acquired for this true art form.



So it is in this spirit that I present some of the activities that we have been pursuing out in Oregon with our horses and the use of a garrocha-like instrument. The traditional garrocha is more like a spear or lance, with a metal point on the end. The working Spanish cowboy, or Doma Vaquera would have used the pole to fend off cattle, or as a method of testing the temperament of the bulls by pushing on the hip to eventually trip the bull. If he came up fighting mad, then he might make a great bull! Today, these traditions are preformed in a beautiful dance, (no bull!), using Spanish guitar music, where the horse and rider gracefully flex and canter around and under the garrocha.

Why Use the Garrocha? Below you'll find the major horsemanship element that I have found have improved when using the garrocha:

Posture & Focus: Since the pole is always held in your right hand, it requires that you sit up straight in the saddle with shoulders, hips, and legs correctly positioned to influence the horse. It seems remarkable that a simple 13-foot long pole, placed in your right hand or resting on your right shoulder could so easily effect how you sit in the saddle...But it does! In addition, the use of the garrocha directly influences your ability to focus, which of course influences your posture. Looking where you want to go, around or under the pole and then visualizing the maneuver will become second-nature when you add the element of the garrocha to your routine.

Rhythm & Timing: The master horseman of old and current will concur on the importance of 'rhythm' as we develop our horses. The ability to ride a perfect circle, with consistent rhythm, is perhaps one of the most difficult exercises to achieve. By placing the point of the garrocha on the ground and riding forward around it in a circle, you quickly recognize if your horse's shoulders are falling in or if hips are casting out. Then when you add the elements such as a turn on center or canter pirouette *under* the garracho, you definitely begin to recognize the need for timing, multi-tasking your aids, rhythm and focus.

Balance & Use of Aids: Intimately related to good posture, the garracho requires you to develop an understanding of your balance and pressure aids, so that you can stay out of the way of the horse and yet influence his positive balance. Again, it is amazing that a simple little pole could assist us in easily understanding the balance and aids needed to accomplish maneuvers such as half-pass or leg-yield, but it will! With the pole in your hand, you will quickly see and feel common mistakes, such as using your seat to 'push' the horse sideways. By straightening-up, sitting or balancing the direction you want the horse to move sideways, you maintain an open angle with the pole, inviting the horse to move under your balance.

Confidence & Fun! This may be the biggest benefit. It takes confidence in both horse and rider to work with a 13-foot long pole! Riding around, under, away from, and carrying the pole is not easy and more than a little intimidating at first. However, it is amazing how quickly both horse and rider take to the maneuvers. Add a little Spanish guitar music, and even a simple circle at the walk with the garrocha becomes a dance! (Note: In traditional performance, the art form of using the garrocha is accomplished only at the walk and canter, with reins attached to the belt, and always *only* the right hand or resting on the right shoulder, is the garrocha placed.)

So now you are ready and motivated to get started! Here is the sequence that has worked well in our Doma Vaquera clinics: (Note: The pole we have been practicing with is a 1.75 inch hand rail approximately 13 feet long. You are seeking a pole that is not too flexible and around which you can easily place your hand. A little linseed oil makes for an easy slide without slivers.)



Start on the Ground This is recommendation will not surprise any of you long-time readers, as I am convinced that riding your two-leg horse can give you many valuable answers for riding the four-leg type! Begin by placing the garrocha on your right shoulder and walk forward on a circle. Focus slightly to the right, and notice how the pole helps you keep your shoulder blades balanced over your seat bones/hips, and slightly back to the right. If the garrocha moves up and down on your shoulder then you are not walking a perfect circle! Next, try the same maneuver holding the pole in your right hand like a 'U', thumb facing forward. Now you are set for some fancy moves! Picture a

turn-on-center to the right, where you will ride under the pole. Keep your forward momentum, and notice how you have to free-up your left shoulder and draw back your right hip to make this small circle. Half-way through the circle, you will probably have to reverse your hand position to keep the garrocha comfortably in your hand.

Now it is time to move on to maneuvers where the pole is located to your left. There are two ways to get on to a left-circle: 1) As you travel on a circle to the right, lift the pole with your right hand, change the bend and focus to the left, and ride a half-circle away for the pole;

2) Continue to the right and start the turn-on-center, but only accomplish one-half of the circle. Using either method, there may be a point that you will need to reverse the hand position you have on the garrocha. Next, ride a circle to the left, with your right elbow raised high, and notice how your left hip automatically draws slightly back and your right shoulder rides forward as you focus on the point of pole at the center of the circle. Finally, practice your full turn-on-center to the left, under the pole and the half changes of direction under or away from the pole. The key is trying to keep a forward and rhythmic flow throughout all maneuvers. No Backing UP!

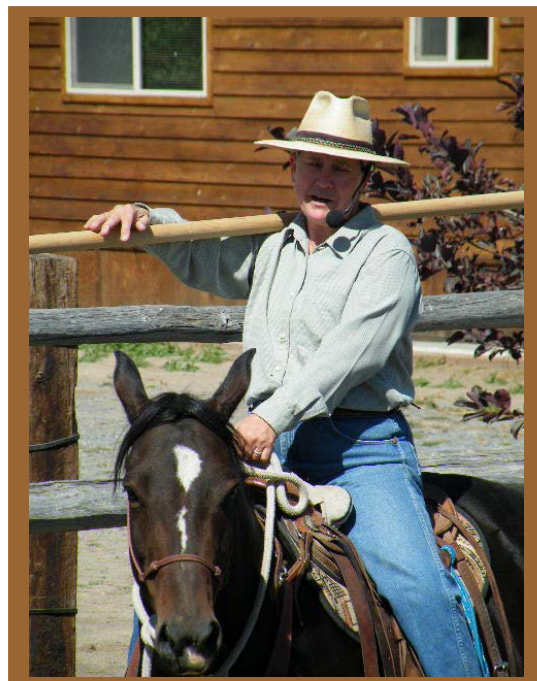


Lateral movements are next, and you will want to practice leg-yields (bend around the pole, but sideways movement away), and half-pass (bend around the pole, but moving closer and the pole becomes more vertical.)

Prepare Your Horse Ok...you are ready to terrorize your horse! Actually, I have found that most horses take to the skills with the garrocha very quickly. Prerequisites for you and your horse should be: Ability to walk, trot, and canter, plus comfortable riding under obstacles. In addition, preparation in dragging small logs or objects would be helpful. It may also want to have a helper on the ground walk with you, on the inside of the circle, to carry the garrocha until the horse gets accustomed to seeing it in his vision, hearing it drag, and going underneath the pole.

Riding with the Garrocha I start riding with the garrocha by accomplishing the same right-hand circle and exercises that I did on my two-leg horse. Now however, you have a head, neck, rib cage, and rump, plus four legs of which to be aware! Feel, timing, and balance are about to kick-in!

The rest is up to you and your horse. The patterns and combination of maneuvers should have a flow, which requires picturing and patience on your part. See the movement, set it up, and wait until the horse finds it. Soon you will be adding to the basic movements I have suggested, and truly dancing with your horse. I highly recommend watching some video of quality garracho work, such as Jesus Morales. These will give you many other ideas and truly will inspire any aspiring horseman.



Reference:

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970-385-4703 – Books and Video tapes
- **Fantasia a la Garrocha – Functionality meets Elegance by *Peter Maddison-Greenwell*;**
Andalusian Magazine – Issue 3, 2004
- **Garrocha & Vaquero Exhibitions – Video Tapes at:**
www.skyhorsekingdom.com
- **Encantador PRE Stallion, Owned by Betsy May Crawford at:**
www.pinetel.com/~eliz1950/Encantador
- **Ami McHugh – www.jackasmtranch.com; Breeder of fine Andalusian horses;**