

Magali Delgado:

Training the Baroque Horse for Competition

by Kip Mistral

PHOTO: FREDERIC CHEHU

Magali and Dao share a remarkable partnership.

For three years the French husband/wife team Frédéric Pignon and Magali Delgado have shared the equestrian direction of the celebrated Cavalia equine theatre production touring North America. Their obvious close bonds of friendship with their magnificent Delgado-bred Lusitano stallions have amazed performance audiences, city after city, year after year. Notably, throughout the Cavalia show the petite, elegant Magali rides spectacular dressage movements on her magnificent white stallion Dao, sometimes using a double bridle and saddle and sometimes riding bareback with only a tack collar.

Lest you think this is all done “with smoke and mirrors,” could you guess by the fairy-light routines where Dao embodies perfect collection for piaffe and passage, among all his other gaits and movements, that he and Magali are Grand Prix champions in Europe? Years of solid preparation and classical education has resulted in a horse that can demonstrate for any audience that high-level movements can be aided

with the seat and very little else, and win in international competition as a glorious baroque horse.

Entertainment is in Magali’s blood, having been raised in the family that first brought equestrian spectacles to Europe. However, a passion for dressage is in her blood too. So she concluded her formal equitation education by studying in Portugal with master horsemen, including José Ataíde and Carlos Pinto, before returning to France to become a state-certified instructor.

Dao was already French champion in conformation when he and Magali competed at the Grand Prix level for the first time; Magali is proud of the fact that of 24 rider/horse teams, she and Dao placed 12th. Since then, they have acquired numerous top five placings in international Grand Prix competitions. They also won the Grand Prix in the baroque horse division (competing against Lusitanos, Andalusians and Friesians) at both the 2001 and 2003 Equitana events in Germany. “But,” she says, “in 2003 I

really wanted to win.” Magali, always full of life, laughs in her natural, friendly way. “Because I knew we were going with Cavalia and we wouldn’t be competing again for a very long time – if ever again.”

For those of us with those glorious baroque horses we want to compete, Magali offers a toolbox of counsel, tips and hints.

The first consideration is that any horse must be regarded as an individual whose characteristics, temperament, background and experiences must be assessed very carefully. “If this horse is educated and prepared carefully and with respect, according to his individual needs and requirements for relationship that his human handlers must learn to understand and respect,” she says, “he will be able to master almost any task or discipline they ask of him.”

More specifically to baroque horses, having ridden and worked with the Delgado-bred Portuguese and Spanish/Portuguese horses her entire life, and training outside horses

including Friesians, she has a clear grasp on their strengths and weaknesses. Magali addresses points that include physical, mental and emotional aspects of the baroque horse that tie in to competition readiness.

The Physical...

“For the Spanish horse and the Lusitano horse, it is most important to get good rhythm,” says Magali. “Impulsion is natural for them, from centuries of breeding for war movements and bullfighting. From this breeding they are light on their front and ready for spinning on their hindquarters, and even leaping sideways. High steps are natural for them; it is straight and forward that they were not bred for. So, if you push them forward too much, they run after their balance; if you don’t push enough, they don’t have enough energy and activity from the hindquarters. From the beginning you must find the right rhythm for each horse, in which he can move with energy and consistency, whether in the trot

or canter. Typically these horses must learn to push strongly from behind and keep the back moving well.”

How do you encourage a baroque horse to learn to use his hindquarters?

“Begin by getting him to move the hind legs in different ways. Do shoulder-in, then start an extended trot, or back up very slowly and then from the back up you pick up the trot. This gets the back moving, and he gets used to going forward and the hind legs pushing a lot.

“Also, what I do very early is to start the piaffe. This teaches the hind legs to move like a machine with the rhythm. Later, he will remember this rhythm for the trot.

“Also, work with transitions. Trot, then slow down the trot but keep the energy with your legs to be sure the hind legs stay engaged until the horse starts to collect a little bit. When you feel that energy coil into a spring, you let the horse go into a more extended trot but keep the good rhythm. Then you do it again, and with this exercise the horse learns to flex the haunches. The haunches have to move and push very well. Also working with transitions within the canter causes the horse to be collected and energetic.”

Why do baroque horses, when you get their hind legs working energetically, have trouble keeping up with their front end?

“This is actually one of the typical problems. Sometimes when they push with the hind legs they start to abandon engaging the back, and then they fall out behind. Since the front and the back have to be connected, the rider has to always be aware of what the back is doing. You always want the back to be moving and keep it moving, especially through transitions between gaits.

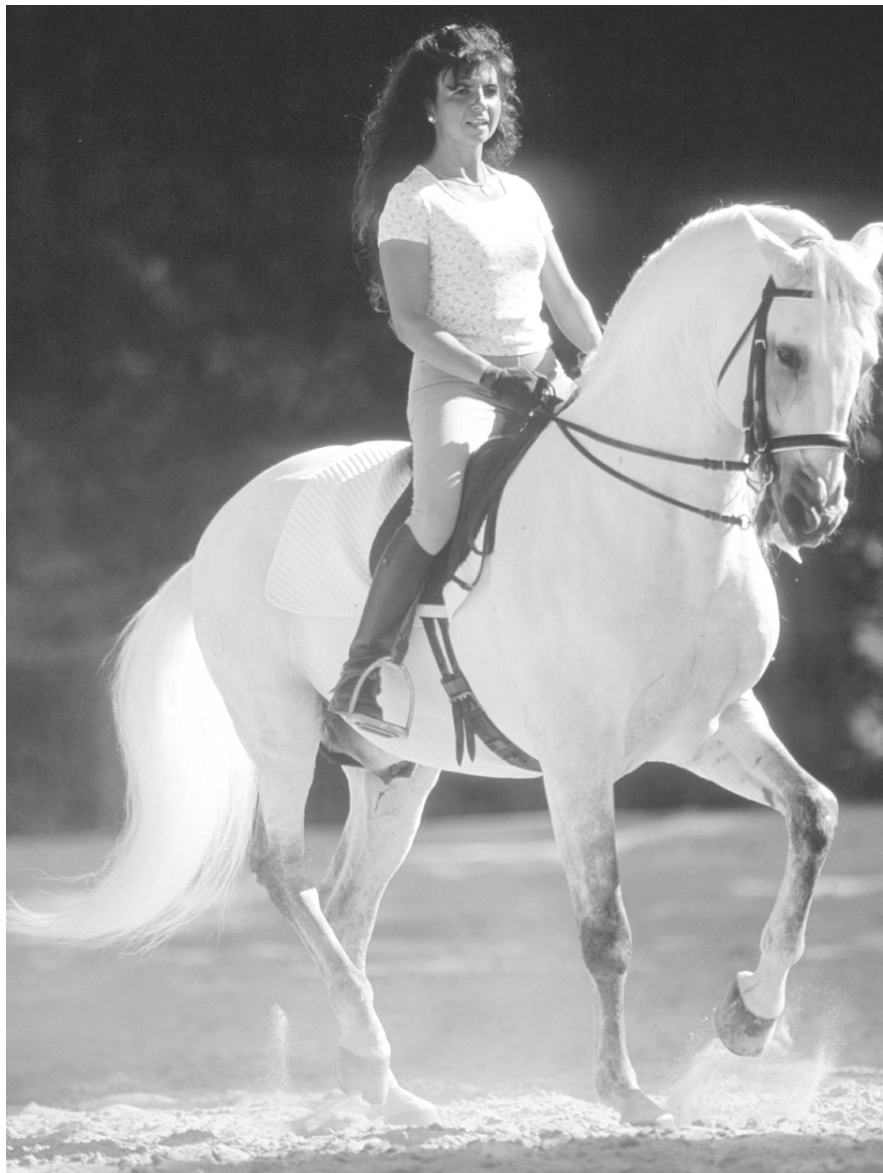
“In the beginning you may have to work a lot with the seat and move with the horse, go forward with him, feel the back of the horse. In this kind of work, to keep the front and back connected, we have to be sitting very deep in the saddle to always feel the back, and to keep it moving and keep the rhythm at the same time.”

Warmblood horses are considered to have a more natural steady rhythm; is it easier to train them?

“No, not really; they have their own issues. Because they are bred to go forward, to go up and down and stay in the same place is difficult, such as with impulsion in the piaffe. But in the warmblood horse the back moves well and generally is supple.”

Do the baroque horses have conformation traits that give them the tendency to have a stiff back or to not use their hindquarters?

“In conformation if they have a back a little long that’s okay, but it



Magali Delgado on Dao.

PHOTO: THIERRY SEGARD

can’t be too long. If it is too long, they might sometimes have pain in their back. But a short back is also a problem because when the back is too short it doesn’t move enough, and there isn’t a good flexible relationship between the hind leg and the front leg.

“Baroque horses must be very supple in the back, because when they contract the back, they start to have bad movements. They get high and have tight steps in the front. But some Lusitano and Spanish horses have very good movement. You sit and hold the reins, you just push with seat, the horse moves well in the back because the haunches are relaxed, and the hind legs are very powerful. This horse pushes you forward, but with good rhythm, and when you have this combination on the baroque horse, it is very powerful.”

We think of the shorter-backed Iberian horse “shape” as being in the form of a square, that warmbloods have a rectangular shape because of their longer backs, and that the different shapes horses have lend themselves naturally to perform different activities. What do you think of this idea of “shape”?

“Horses of different shapes can

adapt themselves to different activities but a big issue that affects their performance is their type of muscle. Some horses, like humans who run fast, have very long muscles and they take big steps when they run. When horses have this kind of muscle, very long and flexible, it is easier for them to move forward fast. The warmblood horses are more likely to have this kind of muscle. And today they are bigger and taller, and for sure they have much more movement than they had centuries ago.

“However, Spanish and Portuguese horses were bred for bursts of speed and turning on the haunches. So they have shorter, bunched muscles for quick movement. This is why we have to warm up and stretch out the Spanish and Lusitano horses, particularly for extended movements, because if we work them contracted and tense, they’re not going to have a good experience and afterwards will feel strained and cranky. In the next lesson they will be sore, they will have bad movement and won’t want to go forward. But if we work and stretch this same horse, if we work a lot on extending the muscle, the horse will be easier to collect with more flexibility of movement. And he will enjoy his work more instead of finding it

uncomfortable.”

Friesians are quickly becoming very popular in America. You have worked with them; how do you find them in training?

“Friesians are really great horses, so rhythmic and so elegant. Sometimes their general muscle tone is lax, naturally smooth and soft. Also, they can be a little bit lazy and they really need to go be moved forward. Their breeding is for pulling carriages and so on, and their movement is high in front, so they must be trained to push from behind and forward at the same time, the same as the Lusitano and Andalusian.”

Do you have any suggestions for owners and riders of baroque horses that would help prepare them for the competition environment?

“For all three breeds, Lusitano, Andalusian and Friesian, they have the same work to learn – go forward, go forward, while using their power from behind. All these breeds have the same general issues in the back and the same problem in the front. They also have heavy necks, so when you work with them to get the hind underneath and pushing, you don’t want to have a heavy contact in the hand to hold up the neck. You want to have a light horse in the front.”

The Mental...

“To be conscious of the mental aspect is true of any horse, but very important for the sensitive baroque horse. Many people lose a lot of points in competition because the horse is very tense in this or that corner, he sees the judge or he sees a flower – oh my god, some flower! He starts to be tense so he can’t piaffe, or he picks up the canter instead of the trot.

“This may take some real effort, but put your horse in the trailer if you have to and expose him to lots of different things. Get him out on the trail and outside the barn and show ring. In France I could ride every day on the trail, and up and down in the mountains. This kind of riding is so great for the horses because they have to push and use their hindquarters. And it is particularly good practice for baroque horses, as we discussed earlier.

“So I did not have to practice with Dao before we went to a show, because I knew the routine, and Dao was used to the show environment because of all the performances in many different places that we gave in our family, so he was not scared in the ring. He was in good condition, he had a very good, energetic trot from all the riding on the trail, he was confident wherever he was, and this gave him very good points in showing.”

And the Emotional...

It is accepted that Iberian horses



and their descendants (in this case the Friesian) are human-oriented and may, in fact, not only desire but require a main human to attach to that they trust and depend on. They then become intensely bonded and loyal to their human and this mandate comes from the age-old breeding of the Iberian horse to share fighting, whether in battle or with the bulls, with the rider. Magali has a poignant viewpoint on the responsibility to be sensitive to the attachments and dependency that the particularly sensitive baroque horse has with his owner.

"It is sad when the horse has been waiting all day in his box for his owner, with nothing else to do. And then his owner rushes in. This person thinks they have an hour to 'work' the

PHOTO: FREDERIC CHEHU

Magali notes the importance of exposing the horse to as many things as possible to prepare him for a show environment..

horse and that means a session of 45 minutes of the hour. They come in, brush the horse to get it clean, not noticing if the horse is wincing because the strokes are too brisk and feel uncomfortable, throw the saddle on and cinch it up tight, not noticing that the horse is feeling even more uncomfortable, get on a cold horse and start working him in the arena, finish the 'workout' and spray off the sweating horse with cold water, put him back in the stall, and leave because they have other things to do. The horse is thinking, 'What happened? Is this it?'

"With any horse, but especially the baroque horse that wants to have a relationship with you, take time to do different things and just to be with the horse. If you think you only have an hour in a day, don't always think about the 'workout.' Do something relaxing for the horse and spend time with him that he will enjoy for some of the hour. For 15 or 20 minutes, just be with him in his stall, maybe brush him gently with a soft brush, massage

him, or for 15 minutes take him to a round pen and play with him and relax in that space."

There are many options for spending time with horses, Magali suggests. If a horse misses a "workout" one day, he may have more energy the next day but he will not lose his training, which is a common fear. She recommends that you massage him a little that next day to relax him before you prepare for the mounted work, making sure to stretch him carefully first, and he and you will be the better for the quiet time you spend together. In the end, if you put your relationship with your horse first, the other factors will fall into place while you build a bond that will carry into the show ring.

Considering Magali and her enviable partnership with the magnificent baroque horse Dao, it is impossible to argue with their success. ■

For more information see www.pignon-delgado.com.

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