

## *Riding a Lusitano at the Belgian Academy for the Art of Riding*

Two years ago, I was able to establish contact with an equestrian academy from my home country, Belgium, and to visit them, observe them riding and training their horses, and take a lesson on one of their Lusitano schoolmasters. Back then, I just did basic movements (W/T/C, SI and some HP). That is probably all I was ready for at that time.

This year, I came back, and after spending the last 2 ½ years focusing solely on my education - improving my equitation skills and my understanding of the correct principles of classical horse training, I was ready to do much more. The last few years have been a time of perseverance, sometimes seeming tedious, and I felt that I was kind of 'missing out' on the fun – like showing etc... However, this has more than paid off, and, this year things have really started to come together. For me, this opportunity to ride a more advanced schoolmaster has been the culmination of this year's season, when all of it came together. I am now coming back with a totally renewed outlook on classical equitation. Thank you Jim for a superb job preparing me for this experience. I came to the school ready to go to serious work this time.

Leopold Gombeer and Michel Barbieux are two professional riders/trainers who head the Academy and run a Lusitano breeding farm in Hoves, Belgium. Michel does most of the teaching, while Leopold works mostly on the horses. Both are superb riders, with the lightness and elegance that must be a legacy of the French equestrian tradition. The quality of their equitation is comparable to what I have seen with the SRS riders. The academy was started by a group of Belgian riders who rode with the famous Nuno Oliveira – therefore the traditions of riding Lusitano horses, and – more challenging for me - riding to Opera music!!!!



The farm in Hoves, Belgium

Now, when I arrived in Brussels and called Michel to set up my ride time, I found out that I would have to ride later in the day because Leopold and Michel were doing a televised demonstration ride at a horse festival in Mons. What an opportunity! I got to go and see them perform. They did a presentation on dressage, along with two competition horses, one of them ridden by a lady who I found out is currently the top competition rider in Belgium. As I was watching Leopold riding a magnificent, huge passage on his white Lusitano stallion, I remember thinking to myself: "I'd love to be able to ride a passage on a horse like that some day". In retrospect, just wait a few hours...

Now, let us get to the riding. Their style of teaching is basically ‘go ride the horse’. They give instructions/corrections when needed, say nothing when you are doing well, give positive feedback when you do something really good, and suggest doing certain things as needed. They only instruct more educated riders here, and that style actually works quite well. I had to figure out the system a little the first day. When Michel says – go ride, I’ll watch – it means that you have to take the initiative, do what you think is appropriate at the moment – and go try stuff!!!!!! You will get instruction/correction as needed. A little intimidating at first, but a lot better than to have somebody ‘babysitting’ you so you can go back and tell everyone that you ‘did’ piaffe and passage. With this system, you have to make it happen. Now, in my case it meant, on my own initiative, trying out movements I have not ridden before!!! For example, after doing some warm up stuff, he suggested that this horse can do all the lateral movements really well. This meant ‘come on, how come you have not done this stuff yet’. I am starting to figure out the system. Shoulder-in and half-pass on a more advanced horse is a lot of fun. This time, I spent the time doing some really nice half-pass, including some HP zig-zag at the trot.

Now, what next? Well, a few weeks ago Jim worked with me and my horse on getting more engagement, balance and suspension. Let’s try that. I felt propelled into something new, got feedback from Michel “Good, you got the passage” and voila! Now, those of you who had the experience of riding passage on a Lusitano horse, you know that they really mean business when they passage. Not the somewhat wimpy passages you see with some competition horses. This is rocket-propelled passage with a big ‘P’. ‘Moment of suspension’ takes a whole new meaning when you feel that you are going to hit the ceiling! Quite addicting! Actually, the passage happens to be this horse’s strong point. I had an absolute blast with this. Actually, quite literally, as each step felt like a ‘blast’.

Well, we’ve gotten the passage, time to try the other ‘P’. Since my horse Shaz is doing some beginning piaffe/half steps at the moment – let us try the same think here. Well, it worked! However, this horse is very gifted for the passage, but the piaffe is a little harder for her, and she will try to evade it at times. Michel’s comment was: “to really work the piaffe more, you’d have to know her better”. However, I was able to get the piaffe several times – so I was happy. One comment about the piaffe was that with a horse that tries to evade, or gets a little worked up when doing the piaffe, it is very important to allow a slight forward motion, so, I practiced that.



Leopold riding a Lusitano stallion at the farm in Hoves

The second day, I did a lot of the same things, plus some canter work. Much more relaxed now, and I am not afraid of taking more initiative. Try some canter half-pass – cool – it worked. Now, I have not yet ridden ‘real’ flying changes on a more advanced horse before. Now, my horse Shaz has done some – over-anticipating when I am working on simple changes, and she decides that she has enough of that tedious C/W/C stuff – but that is not like the ‘real changes’ of a more advanced horse. I decided that the best way would be to try this in a canter serpentine. Now, the arena is quite small and narrow, so I do not have tons of room here. First time – got it – but a little late. We were already well in the next turn when she changed. Michel commented: “first change the bend, then change the legs”. Well, with that narrow arena, that means a good tight turn, one step just before the centerline to change the bend, one step to change the legs, and that is all I have room for. No sloppy riding here! Well, that worked just fine, and I played with that for a little while.

Now, should I try the more collected canter stuff, like pirouettes and tempis? Well, how to I figure this out (remember, I was not told before exactly what this horse could do well or not – we are discovering as we go along). Well, I started just by trying to collect the canter a little more – and – well, that did not come so easy. At this point, I decided to ask, and Michel replied that she is still working on the more collected canter stuff. Actually, she can barely do quarter pirouettes. Since this is not a strong point, I decided it would be better to leave it there – but I was really happy that my assessment of the horse was correct! That to me is just as important and meaningful than riding the ‘cool stuff’.

My big challenge: riding with the double bridle. Actually, after adjusting the reins correctly and a little practice it was not so bad. By the second day, I was quite comfortable riding with the double except for one small detail: the darned stick. Now, I skillfully ‘cheated’ and avoided changing the stick as much as I could get away with, but there are times when you really need to do it, and, of course, I got a correction “you need to change the stick when you change hands to support that inside leg”. It kind of went like this: change stick – get the whole thing all messed up – drop whatever I was doing to the walk so I can take a minute or so reorganizing everything, including that stupid stick, then start over! Michel’s suggestion is to set up 4 reins on a chair or a table or something and practice. If any of you more advanced riders have any suggestions on how to get good with this, let me know, I am all ears. For me, it was just one thing too many in my hands!

And now, for Jim, some of the positive comments I received from Michel while riding. They reflect well on the quality work we have been doing these last few years:

“You have a great position and balance on the horse” (boy, does that feel good considering where I come from)

“Perfect submission of the horse in that shoulder-in”

“You have good understanding of the principles of dressage training”

“You ride with precision”

About the ‘ride with precision’ comment – this horse was so well trained that you could just ride and direct every step with amazing precision. While doing half-pass, it seemed like I could make very fine adjustments to the angle, the bend, the strides, etc... at every step, with almost imperceptible aids. I guess if you can’t ride a horse with some precision, you probably should not be up there. Also, as I mentioned before in the section about flying changes, the arena was quite small, so there was no room to be sloppy. I had to plan every movement with quite a bit of accuracy, or I would for sure run out of room.

In conclusion, the experience of riding a trained schoolmaster is an invaluable lesson for a student of the art of dressage. Like lunge lessons, it is a key element of a rider’s journey. When the time is right, riding a well trained dressage horse is an eye opening experience and a huge step toward becoming a truly educated rider. This is a place where, at the end, the horse is truly the teacher.

The opportunity to connect and learn from classical dressage riders from my home country is a unique inspiration for me. I hope to bring some of this home to the US, to be an inspiration and education for my self and my fellow riders. I sincerely hope that some day, along with those in the US who share my passion for classical horsemanship, I will be able to recreate in a small way the equestrian culture and tradition I experienced back in my home country.



Hi there!