

CLASSICAL DRESSAGE IS THE BASIS OF EVERYTHING

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Sarah-Jane Clarke was born on the east coast of England. Her friends had horses, and as a child Sarah-Jane used to help with stable work and have fun with the ponies. Growing up, Sarah-Jane Clarke studied in the University of Equine Science, and this led her to move to Spain to do a course on horse industry. Sarah-Jane fell in love with the country, its people and of course the Spanish horses.

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Id always had an interest in dressage. In the university I rode with the horses there and took lessons, but it never felt right, since there were many tense and unhappy horses there, always rearing up and running off.”

Sarah-Jane found an easier and more profound way of training horses when she met a matador who invited her to watch him train horses, and eventually sat her on one. “I learned quite a bit from that, and he had me teach a few people as well. I got to experience the feeling of how sensiti-

No money in the world can buy a horse's trust, it has to be earned!

ve and light the horses were, without using any force”, Sarah-Jane recounts.

Sarah-Jane Clarke worked for a long time at a horse ranch in Seville. As of November 2010 she has had a small farm of her own on the coast near Jerez. In addition to her own eight horses there are a few horses living in the stable that are being trained for other people

“I get up quite early to take care of the horses with my assistant. We usually start our training with the young horses, backing them or working

The key to classical dressage is a soft and light balance with the horse.

on the lunge. I do a lot of in hand work with the young horses, and especially quite a bit of longreining, because you can easily see what the horses are doing from behind them, and help them out. Mid-morning I have students come in for lessons, and after a break I tend to school the more advanced horses myself. The students can come and watch, and later we have other people come in for lessons too.”

“I also run six day courses for people who come from further away. Since I also sell purebred Spanish horses, I like to take people with me to see where the horses have grown up. Instead of just seeing what happens around the yard at my ranch, they get to see a little bit of the Spanish horse's history. I think it's very nice for these people to also see where the Spanish horses evolved, to meet Spanish people and to explore the surroundings”, Clarke explains.

Classical Dressage should be the basis for all riding styles

According to Sarah-Jane Clarke, classical dressage means that the horse should grow and develop with the training, as his balance changes. Classical dressage is about communication, connecting and partnership with the horse. It's not about forcing the horse to, for example, go through a certain dressage course, but rather the horses should work because they want to, and they want to work because they have the right kind of muscles and the power to do so, thanks to correct training. Classical dressage could be described as gymnastics for horses, while the rider gives encouragement for the horse to carry itself, always feeling for the right moment and balance before asking certain movements from the horse. The horse should always be using its body correctly, in a way that makes it easy to carry the rider.

“Classical dressage is suitable for every rider-horse combination on any level, since it takes you right back to the basics. A show jumper should be able to feel how he can bring the horse back in collection before he makes the jump... And even horses with leg problems can benefit from classical dressage! As the horse learns to balance itself, it will often become sound again since it gets better at using its body correctly, and can even learn to compensate for its problems in a way that doesn't hurt it.”

“It gives me great pleasure to see people forming that basic connection with their horse, and suddenly – when they both understand that connection, everything becomes so much easier. I teach in Finland and other countries, and often don't see my students for several months, but if the riders have continued doing their exercises you can see how the horses are actually developing correctly. Even if you have a very well schooled horse and you go back to the basics, practicing the use and correct timing of leg and seat aids, for example, and finding the perfect balance together will give a good, solid base for any type of riding”, Sarah-Jane explains.



Sarah Jane Clarke and Embrujo.

Preparation is the key to good riding

Sarah-Jane's aim is to make the horse feel as comfortable with its body as possible. Horses are never forced to do anything, but rather let to develop so that they'll perform the movements when they're ready for them.

“The rider or horse shouldn't be forced to the next step of the ladder if they have no understanding of where they are at the current moment. Riders should be open to learning, and understand that everything comes in its time when preparation is done correctly.”

“The purpose of riding circles, for example, is to make the horse feel connected with its body. In classical dressage, horses are worked from back to front in order to feel where their four feet are, and as riders we try to feel the meaning of balance. So when we start doing other movements, bigger circles or transitions, we have already prepared the horse for them. If you prepare and balance a horse correctly, he'll carry you into that movement without you having to constantly tell him how to use his body. It's always about finding that correct moment of balance”, Sarah-Jane explains.

Iberian horses have a lot to give and teach

Iberian horses are mainly classed as Lusitanos and Andalusians. Principally they both come from the same lines, but over the years the Portuguese have bred their horses from different lines than the Spanish. Lusitanos tend to look more athletic and have a more fiery nature due to their bloodlines. Over the years, breeders have bred the horses bigger and longer in the legs to cover the European market, since European riders might not want a compact kind of horse, but rather a slightly taller sort. Better nutrition has also affected how horses look like.

Krisse and the Finnish horse mare Ronja on a class in Meri-Teijo, Salo, led by S-J Clarke in June 2011.



When horses are prepared correctly, they will perform the movements when they are ready for them.

“Personally I will always go for the original, older bloodlines. Cathusian bloodlines are where breeders get their stock because they are strong, and despite of breeding the horses have been kept strictly within their type. Cathusian monks actually saved the breed back in the 16th century. There were big wars throughout Spain, and a lot of horses died, were used for meat or otherwise killed. Cathusian monks kept breeding them in secrecy, keeping the breed alive and pure”, Clarke says.

Although all breeds have their own special qualities, Sarah-Jane considers Iberian horses to be especially versatile, strong and intelligent, and they also have a wonderful nature.

“I have never come across a bad Spanish horse! I may have come across PRE horses that have problems because of incorrect training. A lot of people make the mistake of pushing their horses when they are way too young, like asking a four or five-year-old horse to perform piaffe or passage. The horse might seem strong, but it’s still like a young child, and if you

keep pushing a child, something bad will eventually happen: their physique or their mind will break down – possibly both.”

“At the end of the day, Spanish horses were bred to be the ultimate warhorse! They are wonderful to work with, and once they know their job anyone can ride them. My dream is to continue breeding Spanish horses in their original surroundings, to maintain the breed as it should be. I feel I owe it to this very special versatile breed, since I have learnt so much from them, and continue to do so every day”, Sarah-Jane Clarke reveals.

The most important thing is a strong foundation

Sarah-Jane Clarke believes that a good foundation is built not only by riding, but through everything that is done with the horse, starting with the horse being brought in from the field.

start reading their horses incorrectly, thinking their horses are lazy, for instance, when the confused horse has actually closed their mind or become sore and unwilling to keep going.”

“My goal when teaching is to help riders form a firm connection with their horses. A true base is very important, but often forgotten. Many riders have no feel of where the balance should be. This changes as the horse develops and the rider becomes more established. The methods I teach help riders become more aware of this much softer, calmer and more correct view of riding.” 🐾

There are always different ways of doing things in life, but I think people should accept that they have to go back to the basics and learn these things before they can make the big steps forward.



1,5-year-old mare foal Torea and Sarah-Jane, and her special teacher, the 27-year-old Tolero, an ex-bullfighting horse.

P.R.R Pura Raza Española – The official home page of The National Purebred Spanish Horse Breeders’

Association of Spain:
www.ancce.es

Sarah-Jane Clarke’s homepage:
www.eliteandalusians.com