

TRAINING HORSES: WHAT FOR?

By Jaime Jaramillo-Vallejo, Ph.D.

When I look back at my life with horses, I must admit that it is full of very fond memories. One of them has to do with a gelding that was my close companion at the time when I was evolving from a child into an adolescent. Many factors helped me at that time. But this particular gelding played a definite role that I would like to share with you.

Within the “*Paisa*” Culture^{1/} to which I belong, kids like me would only have the right to a second rated horse. Stallions were reserved for the gentlemen, while the fine mares and fillies were just for the ladies. Nevertheless, my black gelding, which was teasingly called “*Cucarrón*” (Black Beetle) by my aunts and uncles, was a fine Paso Fino horse. Maybe not as good as those selected as stallions in the Hacienda. But very good and extremely reliable. So much so, that we spent together most of the days when I could enjoy my school holidays at the Hacienda with my cousins and the rest of my extended *Paisa* family. The rolling hills and plains of the northern part of the Cauca Valley were the stage in which family, horses, fun and happiness were one and the same thing.

Aside from the times off taken for meals or for an occasional swim in a neighbor’s pool, life for me in the Hacienda was pretty much lived riding *Cucarrón*. We would go out with our cousins and with the *vaqueros* and our uncles to check the herds of cattle and to work with them, as the needs would call for. When my cousins and I would get bored of “working”, we would play games on our horses, such as tag, hide and seek, races or conquest. And when we got bored with each other or with the setting, we would go out for long rides to visit friends and neighbors (especially if they had pools!). Every now and then, and perhaps due to the *Paisa* heritage, we would show off our horses among ourselves, making them perform their best classic fino.

Throughout the course of the day, *Cucarrón* and the horses ridden by my cousins were expected to perform all kinds of gaits. Full gallop to chase cattle during “work” or hound cousins when playing games. Canter mostly at playtime. What we called “*trocha*”, which is the same “fino largo”, when covering long distances. Classic fino when showing off or when any girl turned up. And, of course, plain walking when we were tired or the energy was low. Even second rated horses, like *Cucarrón*, were expected by the *Paisa* Culture to perform at its best. Although my uncles and aunts would not ride their horses at a gallop or canter, there was no particular presumption that the horse could be excused from performing well in all gaits. I do admit, however, that my uncles would roar any time I would get on any one of the mares or stallions and would allow it to canter or gallop. They claimed that cantering or galloping a first rated Paso Fino spoiled

^{1/} The *Paisa* Culture is associated with the population that descends from the early Spanish settlement of *Santa Fe de Antioquia*. Today this population is established, roughly, in the coffee-producing region of Colombia. This region happens to be one of the dominant regions in terms of the Paso Fino horse.

its classic fino gait; the truth was that we, the kids, were lousy trainers then, and could easily “mis-train” the best horses.

Contrasting with this fun-filled horse experience, my parents enrolled me in classic equitation lessons. Aside from seeming extremely big, Thoroughbred horses appeared boring and uncomfortable to me, because the schooling was extremely formal and the trot felt like torture. Nevertheless, these lessons helped me structure my riding abilities and taught me many tips that have proven to be extremely useful when dealing with my Paso Fino horses.

These lessons also raised a question that still hovers in my mind. Can a Paso Fino horse be asked to perform the same sporting disciplines as Thoroughbreds and Arabians or even Quarters? After all, *Cucarrón* seemed to be every bit as smart, physically dexterous, trainable and flighty as the horses in which I learned classic equitation.

The issue has become increasingly pressing in my mind when trying to answer for myself the key question when I train a horse: what am I training it for? Should it be just a show horse? Whatever happened with the fun-filled all-around horses like *Cucarrón*, which would stand by my side after we both stumbled to the ground? More importantly, if we keep training and breeding as we are now, will there be a Paso Fino horse in the future that may be able to perform for some kid the miracle that *Cucarrón* performed for me? If my forefathers could see what we are producing as Paso Fino horses now, would they feel amazed and proud or would they feel appalled and sorry for us? Moreover, is there any scope for my daughters and grandchildren to ever participate in an Olympic event using a Paso Fino horse? Put differently, can a true sport ever be associated to a Paso Fino horse?

To a large extent, the way in which we define shows and competitions with Paso Fino horses determines the characteristics of our breed in the long run. For the last few decades we have produced horses that barely cover a distance despite performing the quickest footfall of all breeds. It looks nice and showy. But that is just one aspect of what a Paso Fino horse may be. We have left aside the horse's ability to learn advanced training, the horse's noble disposition, the horse's stamina and physical strength, the horse's willingness to please, and the horse's ease of handling. All of these were characteristics that were dearly sought by our forefathers, who used the horse to transport their families and travel in lands where there was virtually no scope for using wheeled vehicles; to do battle; to work hard, especially with cattle; and to pet and love in a land where the horse was the only real means of transportation and where the horse was the ultimate sign of social status.

According to anecdotal evidence, most of the horses that have won championships in Colombia cannot be ridden by anyone different than their trainer. Moreover, 95 percent of the champion mares used by one of the leading embryo transplant farms in Colombia were injured beyond repair in their careers to stardom. Are these the Paso Finos that we want? Should we not be ashamed and revolted with these figures? Why do we allow old-style trainers to abuse our horses? Why do our rules not punish in the harshest way those

practices that lead to permanent injuries in horses, such as the use of certain gears or the placement of the saddle where the horse is forced to perform out of its natural balance? Why is it that there is no widely recognized sport associated with the Paso Fino horse, when there are many sporting disciplines associated with other breeds? The time has come to raise all these questions and to start debating the future of the Paso Fino horse.

The breeders and owners associations all over the world should devote more time, energy and resources finding ways in which we can create a breed standard that translates itself into easily recognizable positive characteristics, and which open the way for the emergence of acknowledged sports linked with the Paso Fino horse. The Paso Fino Horse Association is perhaps the association that has advanced the most along these lines. But there is still a long way to go. We have to move away from a breed that, in theory, is as smooth as a Rolls Royce and thus especially recommended for those of us who have injuries or who just have grown older, but that, in truth, cannot be ridden by their expectant owners because the horses were trained using abusive practices. We also have to move away from the show and competition standards that reward horse abuse and that have led to the development of a breed of horses that can only be ridden by their trainers using tricks and methods that have little or nothing to do with true sportsmanship.

Perhaps Paso Finos would be lousy performers within the existing dressage discipline, among other things because many of today's routines can only be performed by horses with diagonal gaits. But, can we not start developing a true training sport that would ask the best of our horses and our trainers, beyond the simple show off of a non-displacing quick footfall? Paso Finos are as bright as any other horses. They can be taught fairly advanced routines and can be expected to be as competitive as any other breed. Why not, then, should we try to develop dressage specifically for laterally gaited horses? This would be the true test to our trainers. They would have to accomplish really high standards and would be forced to move away from the Catch 22 situation where trainers are the only ones that can ride the horses, precisely because of the way in which they trained them.

Perhaps high jumping and racing are not the strength of Paso Fino horses and there is really no scope for dreaming with a Paso Fino crossing the winner's line in today's top races. But Paso Finos could readily compete in races where the emphasis falls on a treacherous terrain and on stamina; Paso Finos have ranked well in trail and earned ribbons in hunt competitions. Can we not develop these kinds of events, where the partnership between rider and horse is stretched to the limit, and where the horse is forced to perform to the best of its ability without forcing it into situations that may result in injuries? After all, this was the way in which Paso Finos were developed as a breed, by painstakingly selecting the horses that were as smooth and as reliable as possible when going through difficult terrain.

The possibilities are endless, as are the abilities of the Paso Fino horse. But we have to want to explore all these possibilities if we truly want to enjoy our horses. Today's show horse may be impressive, but limiting the breed just to it amounts to a huge waste of genetic resources. Moreover, restricting training to a few simple and elemental routines

that just show a quick footfall does not seem as an interesting challenge for owners, trainers and horses. Our show and competition rules must push the breed to constant improvement. They are also the way in which we can entice the exploration of new avenues in the development of a training method that truly enhances the breed by bringing out the best of our horses and by promoting the best sportsmanship behavior. I just hope that my grandchildren can one day enjoy the magic of a Paso Fino as special as *Cucarrón*.