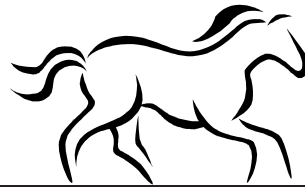


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Electric Horseman Series 2009

The 'Garrocha'...A Instrument for Every Aspiring Horseman

Three years ago I wrote an article for *Eclectic Horseman* regarding my personal journey in learning about and from the Andalusian horse and the traditions of the Doma Vaquera. Today, I have been pursuing this noble creature and the customs of the Spanish Cowboy for over six years and daily realize that I have only scratched the surface of the knowledge to be gained. I am, by no means, an expert regarding these 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! While my cohorts and I have yet to show up at a branding with a garrocha, we have been caught in clinics with a bunch of folks on Quarter horses, all flowing around a circle with a 13-foot long pole in their hand! It is quite a site and perhaps one that would turn the stomach of a true 'Garrochista', but we have found in this ancient art form a wonderful instrument to improve our horsemanship.



Photo from www.johnsaintsyan.com
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I call the garrocha (gaa-roach-a) an 'instrument' because it is so much more than just a horsemanship 'tool'. It would be similar to me calling my violin a 'tool', when over 40 years ago I began to study the use of the violin to make music, effect my emotions and self-esteem, and provide joy and comfort. I suspect a 'garrochista' would see his garrocha similarly, but in the learning process, we all may need to 'fiddle' just a bit! 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, they have been exposed to beautiful Spanish traditions 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! These traditions were then applied in a beautiful performance, using Spanish guitar

music, where the horse and rider gracefully dance and canter around and under the garrocha. 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.



Why Use the Garrocha? This is a great question, particularly when most of the cattle we work are pretty docile. In these cases, using our horses in an offensive manner will effect the movements of the cows. The bulls that really like to show off their machismo will most likely find themselves traveling to market not to the bull fighting arena! Here are the major items I have discovered which improved my horsemanship while practicing with 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. In this case, as your upper body leans away from the pole and you try to 'push' the horse into it, the horse will see the decreased angle and recognize that there is no room for his body. 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 closer.

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: Start on the ground, riding your two-leg horse. Begin by placing the garrocha on your right shoulder and ride 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) 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. 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.



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.) Here again, forward momentum is important, and your balance becomes critical. For leg-yields you balance away from the pole, feeling the energy moving from the inside hind foot to the outside shoulder. In half-pass your balance shifts slightly towards the pole, and the energy moves from the outside hind to the inside fore foot. Remember to imagine as you practice on your two-leg horse, that you are only seeing the inside eyelash of the horse in both maneuvers...not a lot of bend!

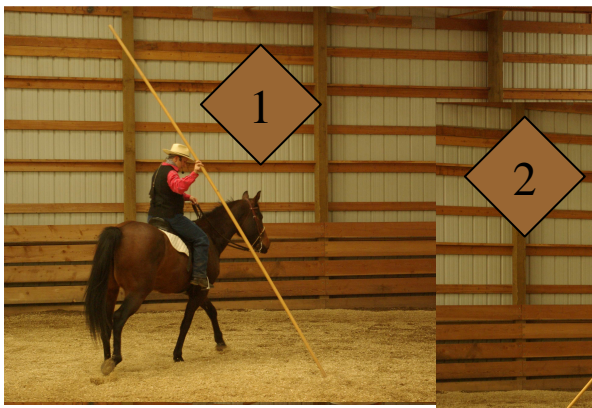
The final move on the ground that I enjoy practicing is an easy way of getting the garrocha up on to my right shoulder or under the armpit. Here I turn my hips and shoulders perpendicular to the pole, place it on my shoulder, and simply ride towards the point in the ground. Essentially, the ground pushes it up on to the shoulder, and then the right hand comes in to help find a balance.

Ok...you are ready to terrorize your horse! Actually, I have found that most horses take to the skills with the garrocha very quickly. Perhaps because you are in the right place, at the right time to influence the movement. In any event, prerequisites for 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. I start riding with the garrocha by accomplishing the same right-hand circle and exercises as 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! You may want to have another human on the ground help you in holding and a little dragging of the pole to begin with, until you horse is accustomed.

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 above, 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:

- **Doma Vaquera & Spanish Equestrian Training Disciplines** by, *Hank Young* - Durango, CO 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
- **Eclectic Horseman - My Journey of Understanding Spanish Traditions 2006** by *Alice Trindle*: www.tnthorsemanship.com/articles
- **Ami McHugh** – www.jackassmtranch.com; Breeder of fine Andalusian horses;
- **Doma Vaquera Clinic with Ami and Alice: August 7-9, 2009** in Haines, Oregon
- **John Saint Ryan** at: www.johnsaintrayan.com



- 1) Forward circle to the right
- 2) Prepare for balanced turn-on-center to the right...under the pole
- 3) Notice how I lift the garrocha to create a hole for Tilly to go into, but keep balanced posture in the saddle
- 4) Continuing to focus to the right
- 5) Changing hand position and just about to change the bend in Tilly to depart on the circle to the left
- 6) Now departing on a left circle with the pole behind my back (Note: I have seen it carried both behind and as in the next picture – in front, but of course always in the right hand!)

- 7) Here I have picked-up a left-lead canter; Tilly is a little out of balance to the inside, probably due to my balance being in the same position!!
- 8) We are looking a little more balanced, but still have work to due in developing better engagement! Note: Ideally the tip of the garrocha stays in one spot!
- 9) Here's a little right-lead canter work. Remember, all the work with the garrocha is done either at the walk, canter, or back-up...no trotting!