

## AN HONORED EXPERIENCE...WITH RAFAEL SOTO

By Heather Orton  
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Clinics, with world class Dressage riders, are a commonplace occurrence in the United States anymore. Every year you hear of someone who has participated in some wonderful seminar and we get to listen for hours about how much that person learned during his or her eye-opening experience. I had never been to one of these “incredible” clinics...until November 23-24, at the Los Angeles Equestrian Center. Owning Andalusian horses myself, I always “try” to attend seminars with individuals who are open minded about Iberian horses, but I’d never attended one given by a person who rides Andalusians every day. When I heard that Rafael Soto, of the Spanish Dressage Team, was going to be coming to America for a two-day clinic, I immediately put my name in the hat, both with my horse and as an auditor. I was a bit concerned with the “assumed” language barrier, but it turned out that not only does he speak very good English, he is also very fluent in German and French.

As riders, everyone had an opportunity to meet with Sr. Soto on the Friday before the big day. This was a great time for riders to show Rafael the personality of both their mount and themselves. As an auditor, it was most fascinating watching the riders overcome pre-clinic jitters. I don’t know how much time Mr. Soto was originally allotted for this phase of the clinic, but I believe each rider felt they got more than their fair share. What I thought was going to just be a warm-fuzzy-hug, turned out to be a pretty exciting session for everyone. This “hug” was just a short preview of what was to come over the following two days.

Saturday morning dawned cool and slightly foggy, which added a wonderful element of grace and mystique to the experience. It was great fun standing by the warm-up arena watching as elegant grey Andalusians came out of the mist followed at times by the powerful dark Warmbloods. It was especially nice to see both Iberian and Warmblood horses working side by side, while their riders quietly chatted with each other. I couldn’t help but think of how far our Iberian horse has come in the past eight years. The schedule dictated that each horse and rider team would go in the order of his or her individual level, thus Training Level horses went first on through Grand Prix. The Training Level horses started with CARIBLANCO (Half-Andalusian), ridden by Tera Gehrig, then moved on to FERRARA (Andalusian), ridden/owned by Jean Coleman, and finished with BOLIDO (Andalusian), ridden by Michelle Pupora-Tardi. At First/Second Level, Heidi Gaian, riding DONNERHUF (Andalusian) started the group, with Betsee Finlee, riding CAMEO (Andalusian) finishing out the time. Second/Third Level comprised of DONNEGAL (Oldenburg), ridden by Jaye Cherry and DOMINO (Bavarian) ridden/owned by Donna Richardson. SILVINA (Andalusian) ridden by Tom Valter and EL GAVILAN (Andalusian) ridden by Heidi Riddle wrapped up the Third/Fourth Level rides. Next came BALDWIN (Danish), ridden/owned by Mette Rosencrantz and WINDFALL (Hanoverian) ridden/owned by Charlotte Bredahl-Baker in at Fourth/Prix St. Georges.

Finishing out the day were KONSTELLATION (Swedish), ridden/owned by Barbi Breen-Gurley at Intermediaire, and MASTERPIECE (Danish) ridden by Leonie "Button" Baker and LEONIDAS (Trakehner) ridden/owned by Hilda Gurney at Grand Prix.

Saturday started at a comfortable 9:00am and wrapped up around 4:00pm. Each horse and rider team rode under Rafael's watchful eye for about 30 minutes, and not once during that time frame did he utter a negative word about any horse or rider. He was a very positive instructor; constantly asking each team to concentrate and push their mind and horse into the next step through encouragement and support. Even when some riders seemed to not understand, he was always patient and firmly supportive. As an auditor, I found myself immensely enjoying the experience, as it was very nice to watch an instructor who wanted his riders to succeed and conquer the task he put in front of them. It was also wonderful to note that he cared as much for the non-Iberian horses as he did for the horses of Iberian blood. My observation was that he was concerned about each individual horse and rider and the breed or level did not matter one bit. In fact, I'm not real sure if he even acknowledged what level a horse was at, on paper. When that horse/rider team presented to him, he seemed to assess them and then start with a fresh slate. I heard a number of rider's comment on how Rafael presented and they achieved a move that they had never even tried at home.

Both days the riders rode in the covered Equidome, and though the stands may not have been packed with auditors, everyone who was there spent their time quietly watching and concentrating on the horse & rider and instructor center ring. At times it seemed as though both the audience and the rider were entranced, such was the level of study and attention. As an auditor, I have to say thank you to Joanne Asman and Glenda McElroy for organizing and coordinating such a well-run event. The entire weekend was brought to us by the incredibly generous sponsorship of Donna Hecht, of Jdon Farms Andalusians. As the owner of a horse, who came away with so much more than he started out with, I have to say thank you to Rafael Soto. My sentiment echoed those of other owners who were exclaiming, "Wow, I've never seen my horse look so good!" My final thoughts on this clinic are pretty simple and to the point; I would do it again in a heartbeat. I sincerely hope that there is some way to bring back such a wonderful rider/instructor to the United States. It is not often that we get the opportunity to ride under one who is so warm and generous in his support of what we are doing.