



ONGOING SERIES

THE PROFILE ECLECTIC

INTRIGUING PEOPLE WORKING IN HORSEHUMANSHIP TODAY

By Katrina Hays Photos by Beatriz Valença Cândia

The mission of *Eclectic Horseman Communications* is to be a conduit for the best quality horsemanship instruction, and to facilitate learning and access to the most qualified and compassionate resources we are able to connect you with.

To that end, periodically *Eclectic Horseman Magazine* finds people working in the horse world who are doing things a bit differently—and their viewpoints, methods, or insights into horsemanship point the way toward greater relatedness both for horses and people and for people and people.

These short profiles will introduce you to those in the eclectic fold—the ones who might think a little outside the box and offer us good food for thought as we work with and love our equines.

THE VALENÇA METHOD



Mestre Luis Valença, founder of the Centro Equestre de Lezíria Grande in Portugal, with daughter Sofia Valença and Lusitano stallion Piu.

Learning groundwork from Sofia Valença

“Look at your left hand.”

The lilting voice came from behind me. The voice had a smile in it, and belonged to Sofia Valença (vah-LEN-sah), who was the reason I was in Portugal.

It was a chilly April morning at the Centro Equestre de Lezíria Grande, an equestrian center in the small town of Lezíria, outside of Lisbon. The indoor arena of the equestrian center had high cream stucco walls with huge blue and white tile murals of historical images of people and horses performing classical maneuvers such as the capriole. Golden light flooded the viewing area along one long side, and two white pillars, each holding the flag of Portugal, stood in the center of the rectangle. The footing was dark and supportive under my boots.

It was a far cry from the gritty footing and sagebrush surrounding of my home arena in Bend, Oregon.

I looked at my left hand and scowled. Said hand was supposed to be holding the light rope attached to the ring of the cavasson on my equine partner with just two fingers, acting as the most tender guide. But my hand had become a tense claw, and the white Lusitano stallion who was acting as my groundwork dance partner had responded by torquing his neck around and bracing his jaw.



Sofia and Piu demonstrating the piaffe.

"Sorry," I whispered to him, and relaxed my hand.

Instantly Gitano softened his body. His left ear swiveled toward me and his dark eye met mine. The groundwork school-master of the academy seemed amused and I laughed.

"Yes!" said Sofia, coming up to us. "Laughter is good! It makes us relax." She patted my tight shoulder. "I tell horses a thousand times, 'That was my fault, can we try again? They always forgive.'"

Sofia Valença is the daughter of Luis Valença, the founder of the equestrian school. In the 1960s, Mestre (master) Luis Valença was chosen by Nuno Oliveira to be his principal apprentice and assistant. Oliveira was a legendary horseman who is widely credited with Portugal becoming recognized worldwide for its classical horse culture. Oliveira's principal influences were De La Guérinière, Steinbrecht, and Baucher—storied names in the history and development of the horse in classical dressage.

Sofia, 51, is slim and compact, with bright hair and a fast smile. Even though the roots of her horsemanship go back in a direct line hundreds of years to the greatest teachers of classical dressage, she is self-effacing and quick to laugh. Working with Sofia there was none of the tension or harsh judgment I'd expected when I went to Europe to learn. Precision? Yes, in spades. But her teaching style was patient, gracious.

As she taught me the Valença Method of groundwork, Sofia was infinitely encouraging, which was good, because at first I felt like a water buffalo trying to learn the polka.

WHAT IS THE POINT OF GROUNDWORK?

At its most basic, "groundwork" is any exercise or training a human does with a horse where the person's feet remain on the earth. How we lead a horse is a form of groundwork. Backing, turning, longeing, the lateral work of moving the fore and hind, in-hand work using a bridle, flag work, liberty work...if your feet are on the ground instead of in stirrups while you're playing with your horse, you are doing groundwork.

Styles of groundwork vary. There are many roads to Rome, as they say, and many ways to help an equine soften, balance, and understand how to move its body in a way that makes it relaxed, agile, and confident—which is really the whole point of groundwork.

Sofia is articulate about the deep importance of groundwork for horses at every stage of development:

"It is the best way to start a horse, to give him the foundation. For young horses, it's much better we start to develop them this way and to help them to better understand the communication between man and horse. It's better to start from the ground, because we still do mistakes but it's much less intrusive than the mistakes we do when we are on the horse. For the more older horse, it's the best warm-up a horse can have before the ridden lesson.

It is a work that can be done just by itself. If one day you don't feel like riding, you can just work in hand. It will be like a Pilates lesson for your horse. In the end you will not feel the fatigue, but the horse the day after—he will remember muscles that maybe he had forgotten. It's also a very good introduction coming back to work and rehabbing them."

At the Valença barn, every horse is started or re-started using their precise and ordered method of groundwork, which is a systematic approach of developing a horse that relies on the basic tenets of the Portuguese school of classical dressage: relaxation, rhythm, balance, and harmony between horse and human.

STEP-BY-PATIENT-STEP

On the first of my five days of working with Sofia, I did not experience much in the way of harmony.

"You must keep moving your feet," said my human teacher, for about the 20th time that morning.

My equine teacher had ground to a halt, crammed against the wall I was attempting to gracefully "leg" yield the two of us along.



ONGOING SERIES

“Gah!”

The whip Sofia told me to “use like a paintbrush, like you paint a watercolor” was clutched in my right fist like I would bludgeon poor Gitano with it. My shoulders were at my ears, my body twisted into a corkscrew, and in the midst of all this my feet just...stopped.

“Breathe,” advised Sofia. “It will get easier. Everybody does this.”

While I took a breather and stretched my back, Sofia took Gitano in hand and, as I watched, appeared to dance with him down the wall. Just like a human astride can look like one being with a horse, the woman and white stallion had the appearance of coherence, melded into one thought expressed in motion. Her legs were his legs, and she seemed to hold the horse within the energetic circle of her arms and hands, just like an excellent dancer can lead a trained partner in a breathtaking tango.



Sofia and Lusitano stallion Gitano demonstrating the levade.

THE GIFTS OF GROUNDWORK

“I had to turn to groundwork,” Sofia told me later. “It was the way I could stay with horses.”

In her 30s, Sofia became unable to ride, due to congenital problems in her hips. She says she was profoundly depressed at the loss of riding, and then gradually realized she could still work in her family’s business and develop horses from the ground. A natural teacher, Sofia took on the task of creating a structured program that could be taught to anyone to share her father’s way of training horses from the ground. Now the Valença Method of groundwork can be learned from their online platform of video lessons—if you are unable to zip to their center in Portugal and be taught the process in person.

Another benefit of good groundwork is the relaxation it brings. Sofia points out that by us having our two feet on the ground, we are naturally in a place where we can attend to the smallest signals of stress in a horse and help him regulate.

“You can assess the horse from another perspective, and once the horse accepts you there you can control with delicateness the body of the horse in certain positions. He kind of unlocks, and it helps him to breathe better, because he feels less stress.

When you ride, you don’t have the same perspective as when you are on the ground. That other perspective helps also to control a lot the emotions of the horse that you need to learn how to read so you can unlock his full personality. Then he can express himself in confidence.”

LIFE AND ZEN

“Hello, handsome,” I said to Gitano on my fifth day at the Valença equestrian center. I ran my hand along his muscled

back, which had a strong downward curvature. Lordosis, or swayback, in the small stallion could have meant he spent life in a pasture or even was euthanized. Instead, he is a groundwork schoolmaster for the center, teaching students the how of how to dance with a horse.

“Now breathe, and begin,” said Sofia as I lifted my hands, which now held two reins. At his left shoulder, I touched Gitano’s side at the girthline with the whip, like laying down a dot of watercolor, and we moved smoothly across the diagonal. Turn on the fore, then leg yield, then shoulder-in down the long side. Turn on the hind to reverse and repeat the pattern.

I was in the thinking/non-thinking place of flow. I could feel the stallion’s body in my body. His front legs were my legs. I was aware of his breath and his strength. Somewhere in the back of my head I was aware of something new to me and really extraordinary in this way of working with an equine partner. I was riding him, but because I walked with him rather than being astride, the concerns of my leg and seat aids were not present. My mind was quiet in a way it rarely is when I ride.

After that final lesson, I fed Gitano carrots and crooned to him. I exclaimed to Sofia how I felt so Zen and how different I felt from earlier in the week. My tension had evaporated and my body felt accessible. Again came her wonderful laugh. Her face lit up with delight at my pleasure.

“So now it saves you a lot of money in psychology!” she said. “But seriously, the way groundwork calms down the horses—it also brings you into a peace of mind. It’s all about energies. If you are to stress, you will stress out your horse. So you need to learn how to control your energy in order to help the horse to relax. So really, groundwork is quite relaxing as well.”

For more information on online learning and immersion clinics in Portugal, as well as free videos on the Valença Method, valenciaequestrianacademy.com.