



*Photos taken at SICAB, Sevilla, Spain by Avi Cohen
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Abstract

Where to start: when the topic for the July article was known my mind was awash with ideas – some quite inspired, others really quite daft! There have been many emotionally moving moments over the years with my horses and other animals that I have written about but this time I thought instead to continue on from the Classical theme of the last article and explore an aspect of the horse's movement, or rather the series of movements that the vaquero would train their horses to perform whilst working with the Garrocha.

The Garrocha pole is used in Spain by the vaquero (stockmen or cowboys) to move cattle around rather than roping. This has been developed into an art form, with skillfully executed performances breathtaking to watch. I have only watched a Garrocha performance once and the grace with which the horse was ridden and the harmony that was evident between horse and rider as they 'danced' with the Garrocha to atmospheric music, brought tears to my eyes as I sat mesmerized by the story that was unfolding before me.

From this, I am prompted to explore some of the fascinating history of the vaquero, the development of the Garrocha and how this very traditional way of life is still celebrated today.

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Vaquera History

Wherever you look our modern methods of working and riding horses go back thousands of years. Certainly the techniques used today in teaching for work, competition and pleasure have been developed from the war horses of medieval and renaissance Europe. Many of the skills required then are still to be found in the reined and working cow horses of today and these same horses are indebted to the bridle horses of the traditional Spanish Vaqueros.

The Vaquero tradition is still as important in Spain today as it was many centuries ago and the modern working cow horse of the Americas would not have happened if it were not for the Spanish colonization of the continent. They (re)introduced the horse and brought with them the horsemanship skills learned on the battlefields of Europe and in working with stock: the Spanish war saddle forming the foundation of the modern western saddle. Movements associated with the stock-horse such as turn of the forehand, spin (turn on the haunches or hind quarter), sliding stop and rein-back all go back to the knights of old and their war horses. These movements and maneuvers have evolved in two distinct directions: dressage and the working stock-horse, both of which form the basis of modern competitions such as show jumping, eventing and working equitation.



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By the way: the practice of branding cattle and horses comes directly for the knights of Spain. The traditional family coat of arms was adapted and used to permanently mark livestock for identification.



There is a saying in Spain that you cannot remove the culture from the Spanish Horse any more than you can remove the Spanish Horse from the culture.

Doma Vaquera is the style of riding developed for working cattle ranches and evolved from a style called jinete. Doma means training, vaquero means cowboy from the Spanish *vaca* for cow.

Ranching and the cowboy tradition originated in Spain, out of the necessity to handle large herds of grazing animals on dry land from horseback. During the Reconquista, members of the Spanish nobility and various military orders received large land grants that the Kingdom of Castile had conquered from the Moors.

These landowners were to defend the lands put into their control and could use them for earning revenue. In the process it was found that open-range breeding of sheep and cattle (under the Mesta system) was the most suitable use for vast tracts, particularly in the parts of Spain now known as Castilla-La Mancha, Extremadura and Andalusia.

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Over time, most of the cattle ranches in Spain have given way to agriculture, and the few remaining ranches raise fighting bulls. The Spanish vaquero rider more often than not is working with aggressive and dangerous bulls requiring that his skills are carefully honed and his horse is particularly skilled, athletic and brave. With many of the large ranches disappearing, Doma Vaquera has been developed into a competitive sport and art form.



California Vaquero & Texas Cowboy

Whilst we are exploring the work of the Spanish Vaquero, it is interesting to see how this tradition, introduced to the Americas by the Spanish as evolved into the modern cowboy. As the California missions began to spread from San Diego to Sonoma, so did the Spanish style of handling horses. As time progressed, the California Vaquero began to refine their methods of training horses and working cattle.



While firmly established in California, the influence of the Vaquero also spread up through Texas and evolved into what we think of today as the classic American Cowboy. This cowboy had, and still has, his own style of training horses and working cattle that differed in many ways from that of the California Vaquero.

The Texas style prefers to tie on “hard and fast”, meaning they tie their rope directly to the saddle horn by a loop on the tail end. The California Vaquero style has evolved from what we see in Spain today – he has always preferred to dally, meaning that he wraps his rope around the saddle horn and is therefore able to let slack slide out if needed. The term dally comes from the Spanish “dar la vuelta” meaning to make the turn.

Many of the Texas style cowboys were not prone to doing a lot of ground work with their horses, preferring instead to get on and do their training from the horse’s back. The mark of a good cowboy was one who could stay in the saddle no matter how hard a young horse bucked and tried

to throw him. On the other hand, the Vaquero spent a lot of time working his young horses from the ground. The mark of a good Vaquero or Californio was and still is, one who could make a horse from start to a finished bridle horse without ever having him buck.

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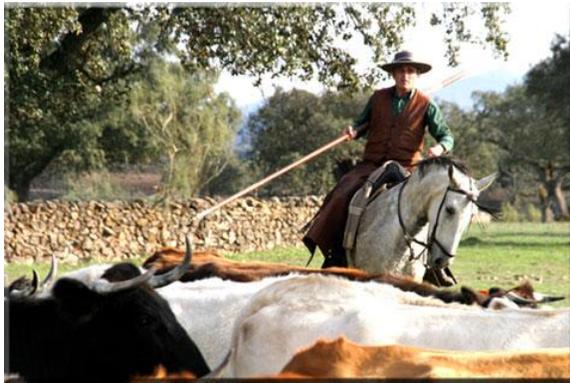
In all fairness to the Texas cowboy, he was not afforded the luxury of time that the Vaquero had. The Texas and Midwestern ranches usually had the cowboys riding more horses than the California ranches. A Texas cowboy might have twice as many horses in his string to work and as a result was not able to devote as much time to each horse as was the California Vaquero.

While the Texas cowboy uses his horse to work cattle, the Vaquero uses cattle to work his horses. Even this has evolved over time and what we have now are two very different forms of competition that have grown out of each style. The cutting horse has grown out of the Texas style that prefers the use of a horse that is bred to work a cow on its own once that horse has been sufficiently trained. On the other hand you have the reined working cow horse that comes from the Vaquero tradition of having a horse that is also bred to work a cow but works entirely from the commands of the rider.

It is interesting that even the tack differs in many ways. The Vaquero prefers the silver spade bit with silver conchos adorning his bridle and a fancy set of elaborately braided rawhide romal reins. Texas style is more apt to use a grazer bit and much simpler but just as functional bridle with a simple set of leather split reins.

La Garrocha

However, it is the development and use of the Garrocha in Spain that we are exploring here. Whereas the American Cowboy has developed his stock management techniques using a rope (lariat or lasso), the Spanish continue to use the Garrocha pole. This form of working cattle is from where the term cow poke originates. The art of working with the Garrocha pole, about 14 feet in length made of wood with a metal point at one end, has been developed into an artistic and skillful performance. Exhibitions are breathtaking to watch. The traditional use of the Garrocha is working stock in the countryside to corral, tip, bring down or subdue a bull and is hugely important to the Spanish stockman.



The honour of being called a “Garrochista” or Garrocha rider is a life-long, and life-style pursuit limited to a few who seek the true traditions.

For the Vaquero (Spanish or Californian), it has never been just about getting the job done; doing it with style has always been just as important. The Vaqueros have always prided themselves on being able to work their cattle and horses with the greatest finesse and fortunately that tradition is still alive and well today. Garrocha as a sport or art form is where

the rider displays his skill with the lance perfected from movements required to manage and control the magnificent fighting bulls. The rider displays his total control over his horse performing pivots and incredibly delicate movements around the Garrocha using cues to his horse almost unseen. Some riders may even maneuver his horse without touching the reins at all. A performer will work in free-style showing of their skill with the Garrocha whilst performing lateral work, turns, changes of leg and pirouettes often at breath taking speed.

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The Tail End

I have used photos in this article that I hope will convey the artistry and dedication to tradition that the Spanish have for their culture and horses and the awe-inspiring displays of horsemanship.

In closing I would like to celebrate the courage and stamina of the vaquera riders and their horses with words from *Living and Working with the Spanish Horse* [Peter Maddison-Greenwell].

Acoso y Derribo



The term means ‘pursue and bring down’ and it is all about the testing of the young bulls’ courage, tenacity and ferocity to see if they are of the right calibre for the bullring. The Spanish black bulls are renowned for their mettle and the breeder selects carefully the stock to be presented for the challenge; a challenge that is also a test of the courage and stamina of the vaquera horses and their riders.

Two riders, one on each side of the young bull, steer him down a long straight line at the gallop and at the

right moment the Garrochista uses the end of the Garrocha to unbalance the bull and bring him down. The character of the bull is judged by his expression, courage and fighting spirit in returning to his feet and refusing to be beaten. It is a point of pride for the breeder to put forward only the very best of his stock for the bullring.

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