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"If you really want to ride

Choose an Andalusian

You'll never regret it"



I first met Faldero at the beginning of October 2006. ²

I had been looking for a horse for over a year to take over from Baron, whom at 22, I considered ought to be enjoying semi-retirement and had settled on a coloured cob type, but couldn't find one that I really liked. Then at a local Equine Spectacular in the summer of 2006, I saw the horse of my dreams - an Andalusian. When reality kicked in, I considered that I could neither afford nor do justice to such an animal, but I researched the subject nonetheless. A search on the Internet turned up some very useful information and I was encouraged by the breed characteristics:

The Spanish now refer to their horses as Pura Raza Espanola (Pure Spanish Horse or PRE) and keep their own studbook. In much of the world, this horse is now referred to as the Andalusian. He possesses a proud but docile temperament, is sensitive and particularly intelligent, responsive and cooperative, learning quickly and easily when treated with respect and care. ³

Just the sort of temperament I was looking for and with stunning good looks and extravagant movement a horse to enjoy at local competitions. A few more search pages and I turned up Peter Maddison-Greenwell's site. ⁴ After contacting them I was surprised to learn that a Spanish stud was just around the corner - well a half hour's drive away, but hey - it's nearer than Spain! Off I trotted (or should one say troté) and there was this beautiful 3-year old bay stallion. He was more than I wanted to pay and at 15.2 a hand shorter than Baron, but it was love at first sight.

¹ The Andalusian - <http://www.imh.org/imh/bw/andalu.html>

² Faldero - summer 2006

³ The Andalusian - <http://www.imh.org/imh/bw/andalu.html>

⁴ El Caballo de Espana - <http://www.elcabalodeespana.co.uk>

A couple of agonising weeks followed as I worked to convince the husband that Faldero was the horse for me and Rachel and Paul ⁵ that I was the owner for Faldero. Finally on October 17th Faldero was mine!

Such a gay day

That is so not true. Faldero is not gay (as the husband insists), he's just missing a couple of important bits. Personally, I can't see what all the fuss is about, but the husband winced when I said that I was going to geld him. He was a tad relieved when he realised that I meant Faldero - but he still winced!

It was just not practical to leave Faldero entire. I was not intending to breed from him, had no idea of how to keep and handle a stallion anyway, so the best thing to do for all concerned was to have Faldero gelded. The local vet did the operation at St Piran's a few days after I bought him and everything went without a hitch. Faldero recovered very well indeed. Rachel and Paul's post-op care was second to none and I was able to start riding him a fortnight later.

The adventure begins

Panic! I now have this wonderful horse but I haven't a clue how to ride him properly. The Spanish Horse is trained along classical lines and I was strictly local riding school. Even though Faldero is an inexperienced 3-year old, he was backed in Spain and schooled for about 6 weeks during the early summer prior to being brought over, so he did have an inkling of what was expected of him. Rachel and Paul very kindly agreed to have Faldero at livery and Rachel agreed to instruct us both as we embarked on the road to advanced level dressage (a personal ambition of mine since I took up riding again 9 years ago, when Baron came into my life). It is a very long road, with lots of ups and downs along the way, but we'll get there!

Life with a Spanish Horse is like nothing else. It's like stepping into another world. Not only are you captivated by their beauty but also by their nature and attitude to life. They are happy horses and they like people. They may not be the biggest of horses but they are very strong. The average height is 15.2hh but they often make 16+hh. Faldero is around 15.2hh at the moment but he feels much bigger when you ride him. He won't stop growing until he's 6 or 7 so he may make an inch or two yet.

You just may have guessed that I am a very enthusiastic new owner. What follows next is a little of my life with Faldero in our first few months together. How it has changed my attitude to riding and my commitment to working with, caring for and training my horses with the love and respect they so deserve.

⁵ Rachel & Paul Bettens - <http://www.st-pirans-stud-spanish-horses.com>

Don't forget to breathe!

Rachel's and Paul's enthusiasm has given me the very best start. I was particularly impressed by their commitment to encourage all horse owners in a better way of riding. They have established regular dressage and physiotherapy clinics with Peter Maddison-Greenwell ⁶ and Celia Cohen (chartered physiotherapist, human and equine). ⁷Oh you'd better believe it - these clinics are hard work, daunting even, but very worthwhile. I didn't need persuading as I wanted to give us both the right start and we enrolled in Peter's clinic at the end of November and Celia's at the beginning of December. In the preceding 3 weeks, Rachel would put me through my paces so that I would at least look like I could ride!

Shock! The art of riding well is about posture and fitness of mind and body. If you can't stand up straight, sit properly, balance yourself - breathe even - how can you expect your horse to work for you, to say nothing of the discomfort you may be causing him. You may be surprised to know that if you have had a bad day at the office, your horse may not be in the least bit interested - he may just have had the most horrendous hay day himself!

Humbled - after 10 minutes in the saddle in my first session with Rachel I realised that I'd become a sack of potatoes! There was me thinking that I was quite a horsewoman. It was back to basics for me! I have to remember that Faldero at 3 is only a teenager and has as much to learn as I do, so I must be patient whilst we establish a mutual respect and understand how each other works. One thing you get to quickly realise with the Spanish is that they are very cute cookies. They love to work and I'm learning that, whilst they're young anyway, just like my nieces and nephews - they get bored easily. Faldero takes on whatever you ask him. He may not get it right but he will always try. His patience is astounding in one so young. I know he gets frustrated with me, especially if we've repeated something several times and I'm learning how to recognise these irritations. He has never shown me what I would call aggression and I don't get the feeling that he ever would - but when he does try it on, I need to be ready and let him know who is boss.

So - show me how you ride then!

Faldero and I had made quite good progress before Peter's clinic and although Rachel had tried to impress that his high standards could be a bit unsettling at first I wasn't prepared for just how nervous I would be and how on my case Peter would be! Although he didn't really say anything I knew he could see that I was as nervous of Faldero as I was of him, but he was prepared to work with what he was presented with, so off we went. I didn't impress - no real surprise there then!

⁶ El Caballo de Espana - <http://www.elcaballodeespana.co.uk>

⁷ St Piran's Stud - Classical Training page - <http://www.st-pirans-stud-spanish-horses.com/index.html>

Why do I insist on doing it to myself? I knew that trust hadn't really been established between me and Faldero yet, so why then when Peter asked if I was OK to ride without stirrups (only at walk mind you), did I say yes - no problem! I was very tense - too keen to show that I could ride - Faldero couldn't relax, I didn't give him much of a chance, so he just kept getting faster and faster - the only way he could think of to ask me what the hell were we supposed to be doing! The more I gripped, the faster he got. He eventually broke into canter, which I have to say was wonderfully smooth and comfortable - if only I'd started to relax into it, what happened next could have been avoided, but this is me we're talking about, so I continued to panic and yes, allowed myself to fall off ... ☹

HOW EMBARRASSING IS THAT!

Oh, my ego was sooooo bruised: so was my arse, my ribs, and my left shoulder - I even broke the little finger on my left hand! Rachel was horrified and rushed to help me pick myself up off the floor (which was rock hard - don't remember the ground hurting so much - must be a sign of advancing years!!). Peter, bless him, quietly rode Faldero around the school whilst I got my breath (and colour) back, probably thinking "oh my god, how do I tell this useless woman that she is - useless and in danger of ruining a good horse!"

For my own sake, I needed to get back on board, so once the painkillers had kicked in, I got back on and completed the session. The rest of the weekend passed without incident, though a little painful and at the end I was pleased with how it had gone. I had learned an awful lot in a very short time, not least that the time for fooling around was over: if I really wanted to ride my Spanish horse with style and both look the very picture of elegance, then I've really got to get down to doing it - seriously. Peter gave me some very sound advice on how to continue until his next clinic: improving myself in body and mind and establishing the basic walk and trot.

Bend, stretch - and stand up straight!

All of which was repeated the very next weekend at Celia's clinic. If Peter was disinclined to tell me how it really was, Celia wasn't! Her concern was for both of us and advised that if I did not ride and handle Faldero with confidence and some assertion that he would quickly become bored and start to take the p***, which would inevitably end in tears. I would also need to learn to ride better and remember to keep breathing. I rode too heavily and must learn to use my core body muscles to control my rising and falling in trot so that I don't damage Faldero's back. I must not think of riding without stirrups until I had mastered this.

Humbling words, but ones that I needed to hear.

It may not sound it, but I really enjoyed Celia's clinic. It brought the physical part of riding to the fore whereas Peter's clinic naturally concentrated on riding technique and developing the horse.

Here was what I needed in terms of correcting my posture and improving my suppleness, flexibility and fitness level. We established exercises for me and Faldero and some basic lunging techniques. I availed myself of one of the exercise balls she brought with her and 2 months on have lost just over half a stone and a couple of inches. My stomach muscles are a lot stronger and my riding position and balance much improved. I even remember to breathe!

The last few paragraphs may have given the impression that Peter and Celia are frightening creatures - the truth couldn't be more different. They are both lovely people, but they are very determined in their field and demand high standards. The horse is of paramount importance to them, which is expressed throughout their instruction. You may well feel like you've been in a world title fight, but you will be all the better for it - and your horse will thank you!

Eh - troté Faldero!

I spent the next few weeks trying to put into practice what I learned over the 2 clinics. We are now nearing the end of January 2007 and I have to say that it has only been in the last 2 weeks, some 3 months since Faldero became mine that we really began to click.

I'd started doing it again - trying too hard to do too much too soon. Our weekly routine was established: sessions with Rachel on Tuesday and Saturday and a solo session on Friday. The sessions with Rachel were going well, but the solo ones weren't really working - especially when I tried lunging. It all came to a head again one Friday night a couple of weeks ago when I should have stopped but didn't. In the indoor school we had done a reasonable job at the lunge, but I wasn't really happy and was about to stop when I heard Rachel come into the stable to de-poo the boxes. Of course, she made some noise and Faldero decided he would start to play up. I decided that he would learn some manners and continued with him. Faldero got upset and started charging around the school and I handled the situation miserably. I didn't actually lose my temper but I did start shouting. Rachel decided to keep out of the way and I'm glad she did. I managed to cool the situation and we did manage to end on a fairly positive note, but I was very unhappy with myself.

I cried on the way home.

It was all going wrong. I wasn't getting anything right. The husband was right - I'd bought a horse too good for me. I was thoroughly depressed. Saturday was a Rachel day and I confessed my failure of the evening before. That morning we went through what I had tried to do the evening before.

Rachel set up trotting poles, put Faldero on the lunge and spent the next half an hour proving to me that I wasn't completely useless after all. Well, it was a bit of a transformation. Not only was Faldero in a very good mood, but I had suddenly found some self-confidence. We worked really well together.

(OK Celia I know - assertiveness and confidence - but this time used effectively!)

The following Tuesday we decided to start with lunging over poles and then ride. I found myself just getting on with it. I did what Rachel told me to, used the techniques she taught me to keep Faldero's attention and lunged him over trotting poles. As he established his stride, Rachel raised the poles. He was amazing. As I worked him over the poles I was able to see how beautifully he moved and how he could develop a really powerful trot - full of energy and such cadence. Faldero worked so hard for 15 - 20 minutes that we decided to forego the ridden part - much to his relief I think! It wasn't worth it. He's only 3 remember, still a novice (as am I) and the last thing I wanted was to push him too far - in a year's time maybe, but not now. We were going to end on a very high note and he could see that I was pleased. The Spanish are very sensitive - they welcome discipline but don't like being told off - they get quite upset as the last thing they seem to want to do is to displease you and if you're happy, they are!

And here we have our turning point. This is when I actually started to ride Faldero as my horse. This is the moment - the next leap of faith - Faldero is my beautiful Spanish horse, I am committed to him. We are now starting to trust each other, are prepared to work together. On the 16th January 2007, I started riding Faldero. Our session included trotting poles. The following Saturday we did some more. This time Rachel raised the poles and shortened the stride and the feeling was sensational, like gliding through air. I don't know what it looked like, but I began to feel just how much energy Faldero has and how much I will need to raise my game to contain and use that energy so that we will look as elegant as it feels to ride. It is quite exhausting!

I also have to remember to keep breathing ☺

And now after all the wonderful words - what comes next?

A first chapter is coming to a close methinks. After spouting some very fine words I now need to get going: bringing money and mouth together so to speak. On a practical note, I have decided it is time to bring both my horses together. The original idea was to stable Faldero with Baron at his yard not far from where I live. However, I quickly realised that a very busy commercial yard would not suit Faldero and how I wanted to school him. His life with Rachel and Paul had started to settle before I bought him. It is a quiet and very peaceful part of Cornwall and he has very personal attention. The environment is just perfect for what I want to achieve with Faldero. Our training has started very well and with the best will in the world, it will not be the same at Baron's present home.

Rachel and Paul have agreed to livery Baron with them so that I can have both my horses together. I hope it works out as I intend: Faldero will have a friend and be able to stay in an environment he has grown accustomed to and Baron will be able to enjoy a quieter semi-retirement. I will be able to ride and care for both of them and as I also work very near, will be able to see them almost every day. The husband is beginning to suspect that he will see very little of me during the summer!

Baron will join Faldero at the beginning of February. He's likely to find it very strange to begin with as he's been at his present home for a number of years now, but I'm sure he will settle quite quickly. He loves being fussed over and he'll get a lot more of that now!

Oh god -I do hope they don't become the Odd Couple! I can see it now: Faldero dashing around with youthful enthusiasm doing all sorts of silly look-at-me things and older-gent Baron insisting he has first pick at the field hay, toilet on that side of the field, water in this corner, that patch of mud to the left is MINE, yours is over there, don't annoy me whilst I'm eating

Well now, the end of February sees Peter's next clinic, so I'd better get my act together to prove that I was listening last time and we can actually walk and trot now ☺

In the spirit of the words of a classic:

"There may be some trouble ahead

But where there's Rachel, Paul, Peter, Celia

A chance

For Faldero and I will face the music

And we will most certainly dance!"



Misunderstood

Now there's an understatement if ever I wrote one. Baron has been living with Faldero now for just over a month. In that short space of time he has changed - to my utter delight and dismay. Delight because Faldero and Baron liked each other from the start - being still rather foal-like in his behaviour on the one hand and trying to act grown up on the other, Faldero performed mock charges to the amusement of Baron, who at 22 has seen it all before! A couple of swift turns on the forehand followed up by a few well timed rear kicks, Faldero soon got tired of such games! Not to be outdone however, he neatly chewed off most of Baron's ever wispy tail - he can be such a child . . . Baron now looks like a Stubbs original. They are now very settled together and if they're not mare-gazing, they're eating side by side. Fairy Tail the Shetland comes in for much attention - I don't think they realise that equines can be that small!



⁸ Baron is also very much more relaxed. The quiet atmosphere, personal attention and the laid-back nature of the Spanish have all worked their magic. He seems very happy and content. Now comes the sad part. Not long after Baron arrived, Rachel rode him in the indoor school. To see them work quietly and easily together moved me to tears. Rachel thought he was lovely and so sensitive. Sensitive - Baron? Was she talking about the same horse - the one that is so head-strong that I can hardly stop him at times and when we were first together frightened the life out of me by running away with me at every opportunity.

Yes, she was. Suddenly I saw for the first time that rather than giving him an easier life after working full-time as a riding school horse for over 8 years, over the last 9 years I had continued the "abuse". None of this was intentional - not even at the riding school. He has always been well looked after and well schooled but as a young horse was apparently extremely strong and very forward going and a heavier hand was used than was probably appropriate. Baron is a kind horse by nature and really likes people and riders no matter how inexperienced loved riding him. Because of his eagerness to career over the countryside, he was a very popular hunter. This was probably to his physical detriment. A heavy hand and strong bits eventually led to a hard mouth. To avoid pain, over the years he learned to pull against his rider. In fact it has to be said that I learned to cope with his way of going rather than riding him properly. He taught me how he wanted me to ride him so he could avoid pain. This led to me being very stiff, lopsided and tense throughout my

⁸ Baron - 2005

body as I tried to control him, which is only now being put right with the help of Rachel, Peter and Celia.

Why are horses so co-operative when their riders cause them so much pain? They have formed a strong alliance with humans over the millennia as they see us as protectors: we give them food, shelter and security and in return they work for us - but at such a cost.

They are so steadfast in nature in spite of everything man hurls at them - sometimes very literally. Baron likes me, I am sure of that and he must know that I absolutely adore him, but he has never quite trusted me as I now realise that I have never convinced him that I could ride him without causing him pain, so he has never accepted a proper contact with the consequence of schooling sessions being more of a battle of wits than anything else.

Over the years we have enjoyed moderate success in local dressage competitions and I now understand more fully what some of the judges' comments really wanted to convey. I was never really in control when riding Baron and comments like "this combination works well together but the rider needs to trust her horse and allow him to work into a contact" tend to prove the point. I was hanging onto his mouth to make sure we made the corners without cantering half way across the field!

At all costs, I must not let this happen to Faldero. In him I have a very well mannered young horse, compliant, eager to work and learn - he is very forgiving of my mistakes but I must ensure that I always ride with a relaxed attitude, asking, correcting and rewarding with subtle movements.

Spanish to the rescue

Poor Baron - he must be mightily relieved that now at 22 he has finally found people who understand him and can ride him properly, so he can do what he has always wanted to do - please his rider.