

# Olé comes to Olympia



High school dressage, airs above the ground and displays developed through horses working on cattle ranches will all be included in a show by the Royal School of Spanish Equestrian Art at Olympia. **Alice Collins** goes backstage at the school's home in Jerez

Doing the Spanish walk: in traditional Spanish dress, horse and rider perform in front of the imposing palace

**I**N December, 26 mostly pure Spanish-bred (Pura Raza Española or PRE) horses will make their way from the country's southern-most tip to London's Olympia.

They hail from the Fundación Real Escuela Andaluza del Arte Ecuestre (Royal School of Spanish Equestrian Art). Everyone's heard of the Spanish Riding School of Vienna; this is the Spanish equivalent of the famous Viennese institution.

The riders from Jerez will showcase the Andalusians' remarkable talents for high school dressage and classical "doma vaquera" — a sort of ranch riding necessary for daily duties on a working cattle ranch.

These powerful horses — all stallions or geldings — have not visited British shores since 1973, the year the school was established, when they performed at Wembley.

The "supergala" they will bring to Olympia is saved only for special occasions and the gold-edged clothes and saddlecloths marking those rare moments are due an outing.

The presentation will consist of in-hand work — including the capriole, levade and Spanish walk — long-reining and ridden high school work, culminating in the musical ride.

Not all their methods are in line with what British crowds are accustomed to, but what they might lack in relaxation, they make up for in panache. This is not, after all, a dressage competition but an equestrian "espectaculo".

## The beginnings

THE school was established under the auspices of King Juan Carlos I by Alvaro Domecq, a former pupil of the Viennese establishment. It prides itself on the conservation and promotion of both classical and country dressage and the preservation and showcasing of the PRE.

The school's best-known resident is the grey Invador. Under Rafael Soto (see box, below), one

of the school's senior riders, he competed at international grand prix level for over a decade.

The pair went to three Olympics. In Atlanta, he was just seven years old, the youngest horse at the Games and testament to the fabulous trainability of this noble breed.

Also on the Spanish team at Atlanta was Ignacio Rambla, another current rider, whose horse Evento qualified for the freestyle final.

## RAFAEL SOTO: 'I WAS ALWAYS IN LOVE WITH PRE HORSES'



NOW 55 and a rider here for 25 years (and a pupil before that), Rafael Soto was a trainee under founder Alvaro Domecq. "I was a junior pupil when the school was last in

London — it was the first generation of riders who went," he remembers. "We wanted to go there again now because London is a historical city of horse people.

"It's a really important place to show the school and to combine our show with the best quality competitions [the FEI World Cup

dressage and jumping qualifiers at Olympia].

"I had a dream when I was younger and I was always in love with the PRE horses, like my father and grandfather," he says nostalgically. "I dreamed of going to the Olympics with an Andalusian from the school."

Rafael went to not one but three Olympics with school horses, as well as three World Games and five European Championships.

"The PREs have such a good temperament," he says. "They're so noble and can be hot to work, but they are always easy to ride. They are almost never naughty or nervous.

"They have a natural way of feeling the music. How these horses dance is with the brain, heart and movement of pure southern Spain.

"They're completely different to the Vienna horses, who are ridden in a more Germanic way.

## In the shadow of the palace

ON a warm, breezy October day, we visit the beautiful quarters in Spain and are treated to a taste of the Olympia supergala.

Nestled in the suburban heart of the typical Andalusian town of Jerez, the 130 horses live in idyllic, chic mustard and white surroundings in the shadow of the Las Cadenas palace.

Spanish music plays and there's a serious,

We want our horses more happy, more free. We want to make sure their job is fun for them."

Alvaro Domecq was a bullfighter, horse breeder and fighting bulls breeder, hence the strong desire to retain the country as well as classical traditions.

"We keep both these two ways of riding, even though the vaquera has a classical base," continues Rafael.

"Traditionally, the vaquera horse has always been a 'tres sangre' [a mix of warmblood, Arab and PRE], but two years ago we created a new part of the show where we use Andalusians for the vaquera, because we wanted to show the audience their flexibility and versatility.

"We still have warmbloods for the vaquera work [the school keeps 12 of them] because they are easier in the turns and stops.

"Dressage sport as we know it today was developed from these old traditions."



Pole work is part of the 'doma vaquera' routines



In the high levade the horse carries all the weight on the hindlegs and remains motionless in mid-air



Waiting patiently in the vaulted cobble yard



A public show in the imposing indoor arena



The ever-impressive capriole



Traditional tassled bridles hang ready for use

calm and authoritative air about the place, punctuated by the clatter of shoes. Senior rider Rafael Soto is instructing a trainee in the cobbled octagon courtyard — they use the noise their feet make on the cobbles to help train the piaffe, both in regularity and expression.

The traditional, pristine stable yards are spider-shaped, all converging on the courtyard with the majestic wooden tackroom as its centerpiece. There's a heady smell of glycerin saddle soap and fresh hay.

The place is abuzz with activity; armies of pupils and stable hands are plaiting and primping the horses ahead of the display. One hundred people work at the school; getting this many horses ready requires all hands on deck.

## Let the show begin

THERE are two full-size arenas, including a spectacular traditional indoor school with huge porthole windows. For us, they perform on the open-plan, unfenced arena, situated at the bottom of the steps to the palace.

Rider Martín Jiménez brings the bay gelding Gallareto (pictured top right) out to perform doma vaquera with a long pole, called a garrocha. Both jockey and horse are adorned in traditional kit — including big, triangular stirrups to protect the rider's foot from the bull's horns.

The powerful gelding is nimble and it's obvious how these movements — here in their most refined form — would be of utmost necessity on a busy bull farm.

Martín rides quietly with one hand and the pole in his other. Gallareto performs a series of difficult manoeuvres, including pirouettes where the horse's head passes under the pole and one-time changes on a 10-metre circle.

Another of my favourite pieces is the work in long-reins. Riding's hard enough when you have your legs wrapped round a horse, so the delicate relationship here between handler and horse is spellbinding.

We watch as Senil, a big grey, is put through his paces by Angel Cid. The stallion seems to find the work easy, skipping through pirouettes out of counter-canter, tempi-changes and cadenced half-passes, plus the obligatory Spanish walk with nothing but two reins and a whip to guide him.

We also see the airs above the ground (how do they train that?) and the musical ride, in which 10 horses perform in harmony. It's not as polished as their Spanish counterparts, but has vim and vigour in bucketloads.

Between sections, the riders laugh and chat good-naturedly — there's clearly a lot of banter here — but as soon as they turn their attention to the horses, the mood is immediately serious and professional.

What's really impressive about the Andalusian horse is their incredible on/off switch. As someone who is familiar with wicked warmbloods, I was amazed by their capacity to perform complex, demanding work one second then stand stock-still and relaxed the next, and vice versa. **H&H**

## How to buy tickets

The performance takes place at 7.30pm on Monday, 16 December and prices start from £22.75. To book call 0871 230 5580 or visit [www.tinyurl.com/realescuela](http://www.tinyurl.com/realescuela)