

The *Tradition*
and *Art*
of Making Saddles

*The Royal Andalusian School of
Equestrian Art Saddlery*

By Diane E. Barber
Photos by Haley Harrington

(PICTURED)
Spanish traditional costume tack alongside newly made headstalls at the Royal Andalusian School of Equestrian Art saddlery.



SADDLERY

The saddlery (or la guarnicionería) at the Royal Andalusian School of Equestrian Art in Jerez, Spain, pays homage to tradition and the fine leather craftsmanship that Spain is world-renowned for. The charming red brick building perched just steps from the outdoor arena across from the palace boasts distinctly unique architecture that readily sparks the curiosity of onlookers.

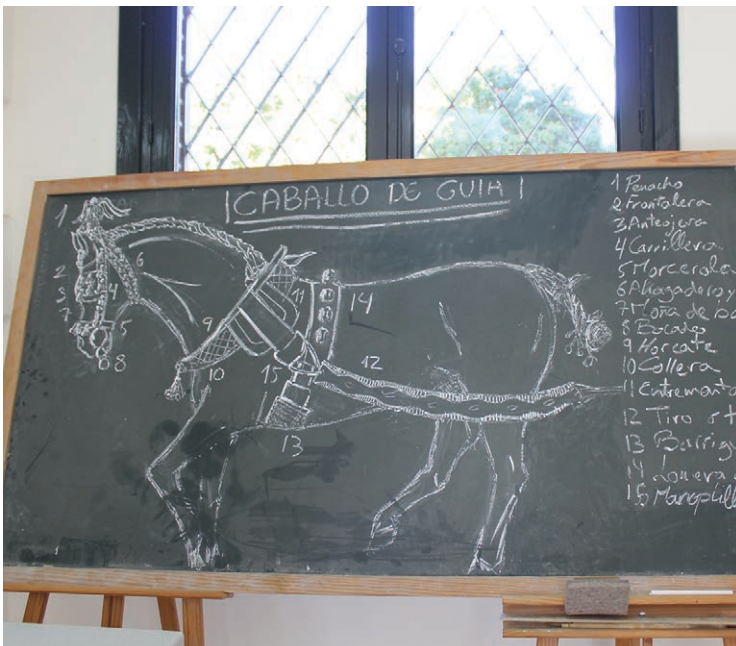
Upon stepping through the front door of the saddlery, visitors are greeted by the sweet smell of leather in an impeccable and quaint studio-style workshop that is filled with natural light and the inviting warmth of master saddlemaker, Florencio Ruiz Castellano.

Florencio took the saddlery management reins in 1989 upon the retirement of his godfather (the official saddlemaker when the school began more than 40 years ago). Like his apprentices, Florencio also completed the school's intensive training program



(ABOVE)
An apprentice hand sewing part of a Spanish saddle.

(BELOW)
Lesson board for students to learn about the parts of tack before leather cutting.



(BELOW)
A headstall in progress in the workshop.





(ABOVE)
The tools of the trade.



(ABOVE)
Embossing the Royal School's logo on leather parts.

(BELOW)
Apprentices carefully at work crafting new headstalls.



decades ago. The curriculum for today's three-year program is very similar. Many months of the first year are strictly spent on theoretical training that includes studying the history of horses and carriages, leather, tools and the parts of tack before students begin cutting leather to make goods for the gift shops (typically six to seven months into the course). The second year is focused on crafting harnesses and headstalls, and during the final year students move up to making saddles. "My students finish the program with the professional skills necessary to start working. Many have their own workshops," says Florencio with a smile.

All of the leather used at the saddlery is from Spain and comes from two suppliers – one that is located in Seville and the other in Antequera – and is dyed on campus. In addition to specialty items to sell in the shops, the saddlery produces harnesses, headstalls

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and the doma vaquera (country dressage or Spanish cowboy) saddles used by the school. According to Florencio, the headstalls take two to four days to complete, while the saddles require approximately two weeks of fully dedicated time from start to finish. The time for harnesses varies depending upon the detailing. The dressage saddles used by the riders are not made there, though they are modified by the saddlery to give them a specific style. Last but not least, regular repairs are done for the school's riding and carriage tack.

When visiting the Royal School, the saddlery is a "must see" to witness an age-old craft firsthand and to meet a new generation of proud Spanish artisans passionately at work. Doing so provides a special meaning to handcrafted leather pieces that are stamped "Hecho en España" (made in Spain). For more information go to www.realescuela.org. ❖TIH



(ABOVE)
Master saddlemaker Florencio Ruiz Castellano at work in the saddlery.

(BELOW)
Florencio Ruiz Castellano repairing a training saddle for one of the school's riders while former student Nastasia Manan assists.





(ABOVE)
Samples of leather used at the Royal School's saddlery.



Diane E. Barber lives in Los Angeles and is a lifestyle writer, interior designer and equestrian with an affinity for Spain and P.R.E.s. Curiosity about her horse's lineage led her to Andalusia and to the Royal School where she has trained under the tutelage of Rafael Soto and has enjoyed time in the saddlery.