



DOMINIQUE BARBIER
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• RIDING • WITH
Oliveira

My Time with the Mestre — Forty Years Later

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ALTHOUGH FADED BY TIME, THIS PHOTOGRAPH
STILL BEARS THE MARKS OF THE MESTRE'S HAND.
It reads: For Monsieur Barbier, with my admiration, Nuno Oliveira.

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in the picadeiro at Quinta do Brejo, the arena where Dominique learned from Mestre Nuno Oliveira, in September 2013.



introduction.

Master, *mestre*, guru, teacher...these are important words. The true *mestre* is a person who directs and changes your life. The guru is a person who dissipates the darkness by showing you the light. I have lived my life between the two worlds – the one we *see*, which is limited (the illusion) and the one we *feel*, which is unlimited.

I always felt *The Mestre, my Mestre*, Nuno Waldemar Nuñez Marques Cardoso Pery-de-Linde Marreca de Abreu Oliveira – the revered Portuguese equestrian who inspired others all over the world to explore the “classical” style of working with the horse – existed between two worlds, as well.

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I believe he had a great gift and an important mission. He was misunderstood and sometimes ridiculed. But I know he had something that no one else had: a deep understanding of his art. Through great discipline, scholarly, serious inquiry and analysis, and a nonstop relentless passion, he formed his understanding of the equestrian art. He was more French than most French people in many ways...he read and understood more books



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I realized there was
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than all of us and was able to communicate with deeply intellectual people, like equestrian scholar and philosopher René Bacharach, who translated the Mestre's first book *Reflections on Equestrian Art* from Portuguese to French. But there existed, at the same time, a man that lived apart from all of this. A man who lived with an intensity rarely seen. This passion, this fire, along with his extraordinary knowledge, was what attracted the best riding students to him.



▲ Mestre Nuno Oliveira riding Soante.

When I first saw the Mestre, I realized there was another world with horses...some sort of secret, nearly unattainable world (for me and most of us) that he navigated with ease. But I always thought it just within reach if I was open to learning. The Mestre had this knowledge within him – what we French call *le sentiment*: the *feel*, the *apropos*, the timing with a horse. When to act, and most importantly, when not to act. He shared this teaching with some of his most advanced students – those who had a keen desire to understand, and those who could *feel*.

As any student of Mestre Nuno Oliveira knows, he was anything but a simple man. This book is my attempt to help others see the Mestre through different eyes: through the eyes of people who had personal relationships with him. And through the eyes of people who have chosen, in their way, to maintain the purity of the classical teaching that the Mestre offered to each of us.

Along with offering my own reflections, I invited three others to contribute to the pages that follow – three people I have known for many years; three individuals who had the kind of intimate relationships with the Mestre that could sustain them throughout their professional lives. I believe that his teaching sustained them, like it has me, through their personal lives, as well.

Let me introduce my contributors: *Dany LaHaye*, *Bettina Drummond*, and *Luis Valença*.

Dany LaHaye was a very dedicated student of the Mestre's from the beginning of her time with him. In her writing you will perceive a strong personal relationship. Dany and I have crossed paths many times over the forty years that have passed since we both rode with Mestre Oliveira.

She has always respected those who know the Mestre's teaching. She has walked the way of the Mestre with the same passion and love.

I met Bettina Drummond the first time I was in Portugal. She lived in Portugal with her sister Fiona and her mother, Phyllis Field. I felt like the big brother, and from time to time we would "escape camp" together. Bettina's time with the Mestre was particularly special because of the



We are always talking about ourselves. We are, after all, just mirrors for each other. But Mestre Nuno Oliveira was an extraordinary mirror. There was nothing mundane, banal, small in his reflection. Those things were burned away by his brilliance.

relationship that developed between him and her mother, during the time they lived in the small village of Avesada in the county of Mafra. She is dedicated to promoting the teachings of the Mestre and feels it is her mission to represent him.

Luis Valença is my best Portuguese friend. Luis has dedicated his entire life to teaching and training horses. He embodies a mixture of love and respect for Mestre Oliveira. The most



▲ Mestre Nuno Oliveira riding Soante at Quinta do Brejo, Santo Estevão das Galés, Portugal.

understated man I know, Luis has lived a life that shows hard work and dedication will bring you great success. He would say that his success is evident in three things, in this order: his family, his horses, his work.

I posed the same questions to each of my friends:

- *When did you meet the Mestre?*
- *What did you feel at that moment?*
- *How did his teaching affect you? And how did your riding, and the way you think about riding, change?*
- *How did Mestre Oliveira's teaching mature in your life over the years?*
- *How does it resonate today in your horses, in your everyday teaching, and in you?*

It is my hope and belief that when you read the answers to their questions you will perhaps find answers to questions of your own. I have left their testimony as it was offered to me – unfiltered. As each of us is an individual, and everyone has his or her own perceptions and feelings, their responses ranged from the deeply personal to the technical, to the specific acts that illustrate an equestrian life that was lived in a passionate way.

We are always talking about ourselves. We are, after all, just mirrors for each other. But Mestre Nuno Oliveira was an extraordinary mirror. There was nothing mundane, banal, small in his reflection. Those things were burned away by his brilliance. We were all better for it. ■

end OF INTRODUCTION

..... Introduction

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without aggression, to love without condition, and to avoid the destructive side of perfection.

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/ chapter I

beginnings.

I was born in France in 1950, and it was while at a Jesuit school in Poitiers that I discovered horses were my calling. At the age of fifteen, I attended Crabbett Park Equestrian Centre in West Sussex, England, and I would return to England in my twenties to attend the renowned Talland School of Equitation in Cirencester before exploring horsemanship and various disciplines – including show jumping, eventing, dressage, and steeplechase – at a number of highly regarded facilities throughout Europe.

At some point I knew that I wanted to finish my equestrian education with Mestre Nuno Oliveira in Portugal. For all the time I was in England, I dreamed of it. Everyone said

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he was the man to be with, who taught in the style in which I already knew I wanted to learn – that of the Baroque or classical way, based on the teachings of great riding masters such as François Robichon de La Guérinière, Gustav Steinbrecht, and François Baucher. This was during the time the Mestre went to the renowned *Cadre Noir* in Saumur, France – the first foreign *écuyer* (riding instructor) to be invited to teach there.

In Portugal, I discovered that the Mestre did not have fond memories of the British influence early in his life so my having trained so long in England was not a “plus.” He said to me, “Ah! You come from England!” I was twenty-two; the Mestre was forty-seven. I was young and unknown; he was famous worldwide and very impressive. And there I was, too properly dressed, and the Mestre said to me sarcastically, “I like your British jacket.”

I arrived in Portugal in the winter. As residents of a southern European country, the Portuguese pretend that winter does not exist. The houses are not built for winter, nor the rains that come in January and the damp and cold that sets into the stone and masonry and stays until May! I found a place to live in Póvoa Santo Adrião – a room in a small apartment owned by a British couple. It was basic and good. I remember fondly their sweetness and desire to be helpful.

//cold mornings.

Learning that the Mestre started riding at half past four each morning, of course I went the very first day. The wooden stairs up to the gallery overlooking the *picadeiro* squeaked, and the door was even worse.



▲ *The Mestre at home in the picadeiro.*

There was no way to be invisible. I will remember all my life the big eyes he turned on me – a mixture of, “What are you doing?” and “I am happy someone is here.” He loved an audience, and I can relate to that.

At 11:00 a.m. the students rode, then we had lunch, then the Mestre rode three more horses in the afternoon, after which we had a group lesson. But my favorite time by far was half past four in the morning, cold, silent, and alone. Just the Mestre, a horse, and me in a very small place. It was delicious.

I could not wait for each morning. Watching Mestre Oliveira was surreal. He was a big man. Meeting him in the street you could not know that he was the finest *écuyer* in the world. He reminded me of Jean-Pierre Rampal, the famous French flautist – a very large man playing the lightest flute in the world. Oliveira’s teaching was minimal and personally given. Watching was the only way for me to absorb all I craved to know... watching him over and over again. I recall living (and learning) by *being* him many times over. Not watching but *being* him. Riding and living through him almost “molecularly.”

This instinct was so strong it fascinated me. Many times I thought about it and concentrated on making it work for me even better. The more I practiced this technique of watching and learning by *being*, the sooner I found refinement of my objective – improvement of my ability on horseback. Over the years I have developed many techniques based on this understanding and practice. My hours and hours of watching the Mestre at work have become even more important to me, if that is possible. Then I was absolutely intent on observing and using every

nuance I could discern. And the more I watched that big man on a horse, the more I saw, and the more I felt. And the more I felt, the more I could transmit to my own horses.

Ten days after my arrival in Póvoa de Santo Adrião, the Mestre gave me the experience of my life. It was early in the morning, and I had my notebook in my pocket (what would one day become my book *Dressage for the New Age*). The Mestre was riding a great big gray horse belonging to a banker. The horse had sinking hips because of an accident early in his life, and only the Mestre rode him. Halfway through the session he stopped and called out, looking up at me, alone in the gallery, “You! Come down!”

My heart was pounding as I very quickly went down the creaky stairs in my street clothes: English jacket (you cannot ride without it in England) and Italian shoes. He asked me to mount the gray and canter on the circle to the right. You must understand, the *picadeiro* was very small, just the size of two longeing circles. So this horse was cantering around, and the Mestre said, “*Descente de main, descente de jambes.*”

I knew: lower my hands and legs. Then he said, “Reins at the buckle.” I could do that, too. Next he instructed: “Lengthen the canter down the long side and circle again.” I loosened my back to lengthen the stride and the horse lengthened five or six strides. But then he announced, “Collect your horse!”

The gray was already going too fast and I had no contact with his mouth; therefore, I instinctually went to pick up the reins.