

2004 ATHENS OLYMPICS

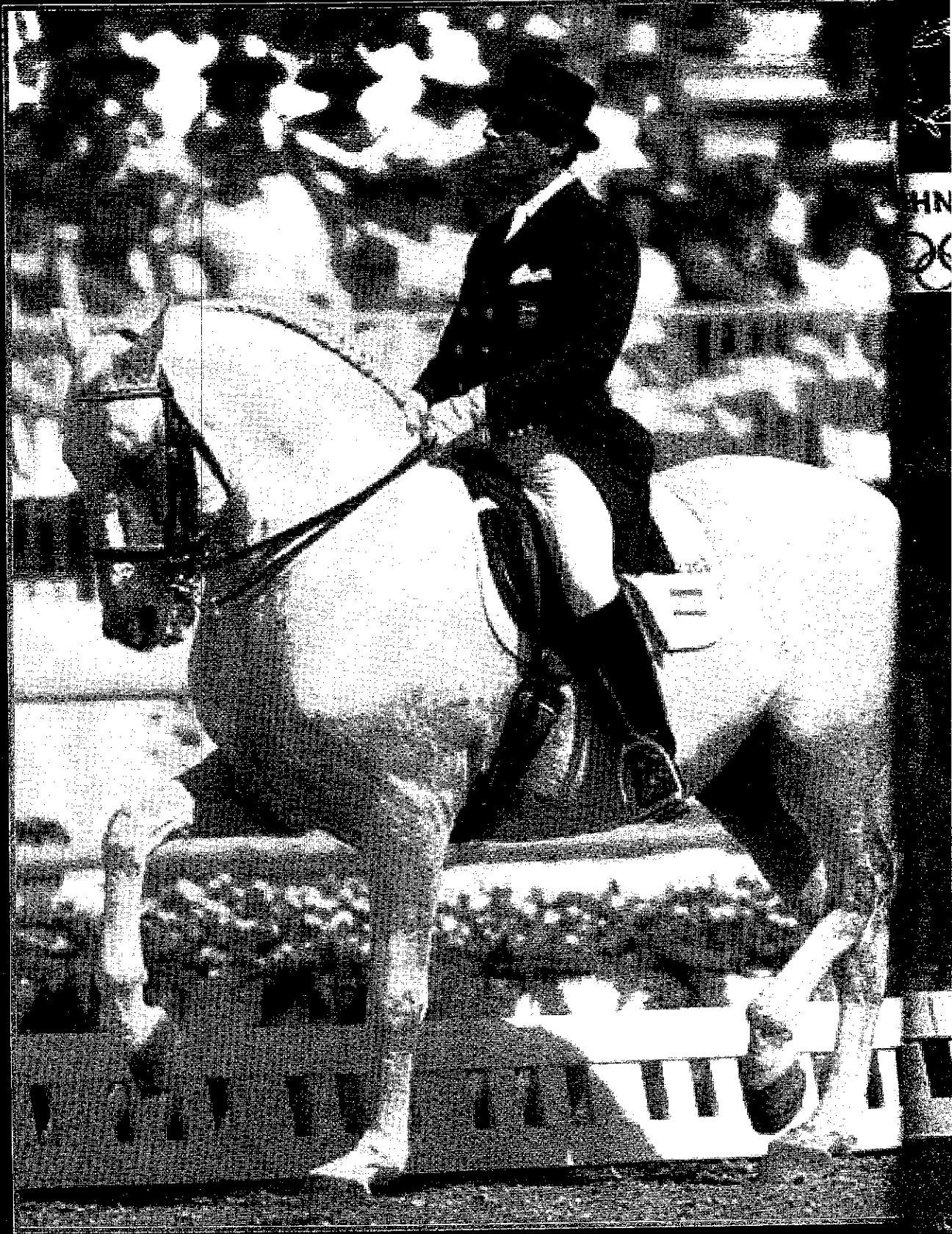


Photo by Cealy Terley

They had the rides of their lives," exclaimed Spanish Olympic dressage team trainer, Jean Bemelmans, after the second and final round of team dressage competition in Athens. And indeed they did.

The 2004 Spanish dressage team, which included two PRE horses, one Lusitano, and a Hanoverian, turned in groundbreaking performances in the Grand Prix team competition to win the silver medal for Spain—the first Olympic dressage medal ever for a Spanish team, and the first equestrian medal awarded to a Spanish team in 56 years. Spain had only two prior Olympic equestrian medals, the first—a gold—was earned at the 1928 Amsterdam Olympics in team jumping. The second was a silver at the 1948 London Olympics, also in jumping.

The heavily favored German team took the team gold medal for the seventh time since 1976 with an average score of 74.643 percent, and a very competitive group of U.S. riders earned the bronze team medal with 71.500 percent. Spain's team score was 72.917. Spanish rider, Beatriz Ferrer-Salat and her Hanoverian gelding Beauvalais, won the individual bronze medal, the first Olympic individual dressage medal ever for a Spanish rider. Anky van Grunsven of the Netherlands took the individual gold on her young horse, Salinero, and the silver went to Germany's Ulla Salzgeber riding Rusty

short time. That year, the team introduced the world to the PRE as a dressage horse, and earned seventh place in the team competition. At the time, many observers did not feel that the PRE horses—or the Spanish team as a whole—had what it takes to excel at the highest levels of dressage. Then the Spanish turned in a fifth place team performance in Sydney at the 2000 Olympics and earned the bronze medal two years later at the World Equestrian games in Jerez de la Frontera. The world began to take notice of the PRE horse.

INVASOR AND RAFAEL SOTO

This pair has competed for Spain since the beginning of Spanish Olympic dressage in 1996. Soto, an instructor at the Real Escuela Andaluza del Arte Ecuestre in Jerez de la Frontera, and the then seven-year-old Invasor (Panadero VIII x Bravia IX), scored a 61 percent in their first Olympics Grand Prix test in Atlanta. They turned in markedly improved performances at the 2000 Sydney Olympics with scores ranging from 66.52 percent for the Grand Prix and 71.32 percent in the Grand Prix Freestyle, and ended up in 12th place in the individual dressage competition. At the 2002 World Equestrian Games in Jerez, Invasor achieved a sixth place in individual dressage and was integral to the Spanish team's third place finish at the Games.

THE RIDES OF THEIR LIVES:
P.R.E. HORSES
AT THE 2004
ATHENS OLYMPICS

WRITTEN BY CYNTHIA SPANHEL

The Spanish dressage riders, having competed in the Olympics only since 1996 in Atlanta, have come a very long way in a relatively

Then in Athens this year, the 15-year-old Invasor, characterized by dressage writer, Nancy Jaffer, as a "comfortable couch of a



horse, an old-fashioned heavyset Andalusian," produced the best Grand Prix test of his life. At the end of Grand Prix Round 1, Soto and Invasor were the leaders, posting an average score of 72.792 percent and paving the way for Spain's team silver medal. Invasor ended the Grand Prix phase of the competition in seventh place.

Though the team competition is based solely on the Grand Prix test, individual dressage medals are awarded on the basis of the average of scores in the Grand Prix, the Grand Prix Special, and the Grand Prix Freestyle. The top 25 riders from the Grand Prix phase qualify to compete in the Grand Prix Special, a

Soto and Invasor finished the individual dressage competition with an average score across all three phases of 73.606 percent and in eighth place. This is the third and final Olympics for Invasor.

IGNACIO RAMBLA AND OLEAJE

Ignacio Rambla is the head of the Real Escuela Andaluza del Arte Ecuestre, and, like Rafael Soto, is a very experienced international rider. He achieved renown in the PRE world by riding Evento (Leviton x Tecnica) to an 11th place finish in individual dressage at the 1996 Atlanta Olympics.

"They had the rides of their lives," exclaimed Spanish Olympic dressage team trainer, Jean Bemelmans, after the second and final round of team dressage competition in Athens. And indeed they did.

shorter, but more difficult test than the Grand Prix, and the top 15 from the Special advance to the final phase, the Grand Prix Freestyle.

Invasor's solid performance in the Grand Prix was not sustained in the Grand Prix Special. On a very windy day, Invasor's test was marred by several mistakes, and he completed this segment of the individual competition with a 69 percent, which dropped him to 12th place overall. Soto reported later that Invasor was not feeling well and had had a cough after the Grand Prix test.

Invasor and Soto returned to form in the Grand Prix Freestyle. Dancing to their trademark flamenco music, the pair turned in score of 79.025 percent for a fourth place finish in this phase of the competition. Soto, renowned for his showmanship, thrilled the spectators with a final passage down centerline, all the while encouraging them to clap to the rhythm of the music. When asked what he thought of Invasor's performance in the freestyle, Soto said, "Today he gave 100 percent. He is an artist in the Freestyle...We have been working on the Freestyle for nine years so I guess it is time to be rewarded for the hard work."

His new PRE mount, Oleaje (Bizarro XIV x Ignea), is only 10 years old, just two years above the minimum age of eight for horses competing at the 2004 Olympics, and this was his first competition at this level. Still, this young horse produced one of the best scores of his life in the Athens Grand Prix test—64.750 percent—resulting in a 41st place finish. Because he was not in the top 25 after the Grand Prix, he did not compete in the Grand Prix Special or the Freestyle. Commenting on his horse's performance in Athens, Rambla said, "I am extremely pleased with my horse. Although he is very young and I didn't have a lot of time to prepare him, we have been training well...His behavior in the test was super!"

Some observers feel that Oleaje has the most raw talent of any of the Spanish team horses, and he may well be the rising star of Spanish dressage. He recently finished ninth in the Grand Prix and seventh in the Grand Prix Special at the 2004 Spanish Dressage Championships in October.

The 1996 Olympics was a tipping point in the perception of the PRE horse's potential as an international sport horse, and now the 2004 Olympic performance by the Spanish dressage team

leaves little doubt that Spain is on the brink of becoming a true dressage power. Finally, the equestrian world is coming to recognize what readers of this magazine have known all along—the PRE horse is the most educable, talented, affable, charismatic, and noble of all breeds.

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CYNTHIA SPANHEL

Cynthia Spanhel is an amateur dressage rider and breeds PRE sport horses at her Blue Fire Moon Farm in Driftwood, Texas. Her stallion, Odilon JIM, was a 2000 Southwest Dressage Championship finalist.



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