



The Cobra

A group or string of mares.

In traditional Spanish competition often referred to as a 'lote de yeguas' (a batch, or lot, of mares).

The history of the Cobra, or lote de yeguas

In days gone by mares in Spain were often used for threshing grain. Linked together with neck collars, a group of maybe two or more mares would be linked together to a central pole in a threshing circle and walk or trot in circles in order to thresh the grain from the chaff.

Each mare would have a small bell fitted to her neck collar and so the farmer could hear when the mares were working, or had stopped. Sometimes the bells were selected to give a different timbre and the farmer would know which sound related to which individual mare.

Traditionally their tails were trimmed a little shorter than normal, at around hock level, to keep them from dragging in the chaff and picking up debris. As most breeding mares would have the tops of their tails shaved then sometimes they would have a 'ring', or rings, carefully shaved just below the base of the main shaved section. In practice it was usually found best to connect the mares together in a preferred order, so starting with the mare that was usually furthest from the handler, the lead or number one mare, that mare would have one ring shaved into her tail, the next mare would have two rings, the next three, and so on. Any farm worker could then easily see in which order the mares needed to be linked.

This photograph shows the mare Encantadora V, bred and shown by Yeguada Iberica used in competition (lote de tres yeguas, or Cobra). She has three rings shaved into her tail and so in a Cobra of 3 mares she would perform next to her handler.



Cobra Competition in Spain

The Cobra, or lote de yeguas, forms an important part of National and regional competition throughout Spain and is especially important to the breeders of the Purebred Spanish Horse (PRE). Although stallions are more often traditionally ridden in Spain, a stud's mares are usually considered to represent the value or success of the breeder or stud.

Traditionally breeders try to produce a 'type', i.e. stock with similar characteristics, or a consistent type, rather than a hotchpotch of shapes, sizes and colours. Obviously their stock has to conform to the correct breed type, but in competition the mares will gain higher marks if all of a similar type, size and colour.

In competition three mares are shown together. They are usually judged individually and as an overall group, the overall picture being important. They should work quietly and obediently in harmony, although some 'chispa' (sparkle) is not a bad thing. Good movement is also important and can gain or lose points. The mares are shown at walk and trot and should work calmly together in a harmonious and straight line, finishing by standing still, in a straight line, for the judge's closer inspection.



*The photograph is of a Cobra of 4 in a display by Richard Lust and Yeguada Iberica
From left to right: Moraleja, Brincadora XV, Seductora XVII, Oretana III*

Competent traditional handlers will show their mares using a fairly long leather lead rope connected to the first mare's leather neck collar, which is in turn

connected to the next mare's neck collar, and so to the third mare's collar. None of the mares would wear a head collar, allowing the judge a clear view of each mare's head. Unfortunately we see handlers at shows now with their lead rope connected to a head collar on the first mare. This is not traditional and shows that perhaps the handler does not have the ability or the confidence to control his mares by traditional methods, or maybe the mares lack the even temperament or training required. Worse is when all the mares are shown in head collars.

Training a lote de yeguas, or Cobra

If you have a good selection of calm and sensible mares, preferably matching as best as possible in type, size and colour, you can often progress amazingly quickly to a working team of three. If however your mares are not experienced in understanding your voice, or leading well, then it would probably be best to begin your training with each mare individually.

First each mare should be able to work obediently on the lunge and understand simple short voice commands; to walk, trot and stop. Remember to modulate the expression in your voice, which is more important than any 'words' you use. Mostly what works best is a sharper 'upwards' sounding command for upwards tempo, i.e. for standing to walk and walk to trot, with a 'downwards' and softer sound when coming down from trot to walk. Most mares seem to respond well to a longer and more drawn out 'hoooww' (or similar!) to stop.

Note: With patience you can help each mare understand when you are speaking specifically to her, not the entire group, by saying her name clearly each time immediately before giving her an instruction. This can be a great help if you ever show a larger group of mares than three, or handle the mares from the back of a ridden horse.

Once each mare responds promptly to your commands in a relaxed way you are ready to start putting them together.

What I tend to find works best is to place the most attentive and responsive mare furthest away, as the 'third' mare. The more 'novice' would usually be next to me, i.e. the 'first' mare, with the least attentive in the centre, i.e. the 'second' mare. The reason for this is that if you have a mare with a short attention span she will usually follow the mares on each side of her!

If you are concerned on your first attempt then it is probably safer to fit each mare with a head collar and connect them all up to these, including your own lead rope. Once you have mastered this then you could proceed to connecting the three mares together by their neck collars, with just your nearest mare

connected to you by her head collar. Once you have mastered this then you could remove the head collar and use the neck collars only, on all the mares.

You will need to carry a long stick, or whip. Some traditionalists use a long stick from the quince tree, otherwise some use a modern Piaffe whip or even a lunge whip with most of the thong removed. The whip or stick is not a weapon and should be used as an extension of your arm, to guide the horses and help to train them to stop together and in a straight line, or to encourage to move on a lazy or slow to respond mare.

Cobra exhibitions

As you become more efficient you may wish to exhibit them (not in competition) in greater numbers, say 5, 7 or 9 mares. In parts of Spain exceptional handlers at some of the major studs have demonstrated as many as 21 mares in one Cobra line-up.

To achieve this all your mares must be well attuned to your voice commands and respond immediately, with the mare at the end, or furthest away from the handler very attentive, responsive yet obedient.

Top handlers will canter their Cobras, have them walking backwards in line or full pass. At the evening performances at the annual SICAB exhibition for the PRE horse in Seville, Cobras of 21 mares have been shown, finishing by the entire Cobra full-passing out of the arena exit.

At Yeguada Iberica and in exhibitions and bullrings in Spain, Richard Lust regularly exhibits a Cobra of 3 or 5 mares while riding one of the stud's stallions. At their last Open Day in the UK before the stud re-located to Spain, the show ended with Richard riding Yeguada Iberica's stallion Granero IV at Piaffe in slow pirouette, with the Cobra of mares, Seductora XVII, Oretana III and Brincadora XV, keeping pace on the circle at walk.



Then at their last public UK performance at the East of England Show, the mares finished by wrapping around Granero in a circle, while Richard thanked each mare in turn, before 'unwrapping' themselves by walking backwards into a straight line once again to stand quietly to finish.



From a drawing by Glynis Mills, taken from a photograph of an exhibition of a Cobra of 5 mares from Yeguada Iberica.

From the left: Moraleja, Brincadora XV, Seductora XVII, Oretana III, Encantadora V

The traditional equipment



A traditional set of three leather neck collars, with bells attached, plus a long leather lead rope (traditionally 'ball-ended').

Neck collars and linking straps can be added according to how many mares you want to show, or work.



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