

Access all areas João Torrão



João Torrão and Equador MVL include plentiful hacking alongside work in the school at their base at Monte Velho in Portugal's Alentejo

Portugal's new senior dressage champion João Torrão has risen rapidly through the levels, setting records as he goes. *Briony Reed* discovers where and how he hones his talent

JOÃO MIGUEL TORRÃO already has a competition record of which anyone would be proud. It is less than two years since the 27-year-old rode his first international grand prix, and it was also the first test at that level for his equine partner, 12-year-old Lusitano stallion Equador MVL.

Just four months later, the pair won the grand prix special at Hickstead, helping Portugal to its first ever Nations Cup win. They were part of the Europeans team that helped to secure their home country's qualification for Tokyo, and followed that with a cool performance at Olympia to finish 11th on their first appearance in that intense atmosphere.

They looked set for Olympic selection until Covid stuck its claws into 2020. Undaunted, they set new Portuguese record scores for the grand prix and grand prix special in August – and then surpassed them in November at CDI Alter with 77.3% and 79% respectively, throwing in a freestyle mark of almost 84% for good measure and becoming national senior champions in the process.

"I have always felt a strong connection with Equador"

JOÃO TORRÃO

PORTUGAL'S cork-growing Alentejo region is home to João and Equador's base, Monte Velho (MVL), just 90 minutes from Lisbon. Surrounded by 250 hectares (just over 600 acres) of land, it is also a Lusitano stud and riding holiday hotel.

A paved courtyard is surrounded by blue and white buildings, designed by owner and architect Diogo Lima Mayer Snr. Advised by his doctor to develop a stress-relieving hobby, and with an existing interest in breeding, he bought Monte Velho and moved his broodmares there, renovating ruins and adding new buildings to create a family home and the yard that stands today. True to the local style and sympathetic to the landscape, the place has a relaxed, welcoming atmosphere.

João is friendly and humble. He lives on site, accompanied by his three Australian shepherd dogs – four-year-old Atenna (main picture, left) and puppies Apollo and Nohha – plus Zazú, a rosy-faced lovebird, who has been known to perch on his owner's shoulder as João schools the horses.



Above: João's trainer Coralie Baldrey, a graduate of the Cadre Noir de Saumur, has instilled a positive and sympathetic way of working in him. Left: João and Equador's bond is clear following their win at Hickstead



"I first came here for an internship as a working student," he recounts. "I helped to back Equador, then joined the team permanently when I finished my degree, and was given the challenge of training him."

"I have always felt a strong connection with Equador. I love to work with him and I worry about him. When he was a youngster, he needed muscling up and I would visit each night to give him more hay and a massage. Now, though, he is stronger and gets a haynet to slow him down!"

One to watch: *Maestro MVL*



"I CALL him a good giant, because he's very good and very big," says João.

At an imposing 17.2hh, Equador's five-year-old son Maestro is growing up to follow in his father's footsteps.

He has needed to grow into himself, but Maestro's talent is now emerging.

"At the beginning, he had such a nice canter, but the walk and trot were ordinary. He needed to learn how to use his body," says João.

"He has three good paces and a fantastic character. He reminds me a lot of his father; he is focused and always gives his best."

"He lets you ride to the limit. I have to go easy as he is so talented; we have to take care not to push him too much, too soon."

“Equador is obsessed with eating,” chips in Diogo Lima Mayer Jnr, who manages MVL.

A stallion stable block on the courtyard houses four of João’s five competition rides, namely Giraldo MVL, Lufada MVL, Maestro MVL (see box, previous page) and Lírio. Equador shares another, newly built, block with a number of the school horses, “because in those stables we have a groom all the time, and they can take care of a horse who needs a lot of supervision”, laughs João.

A third block of generous boxes is home to most of the school horses, plus the tack room and two wash bays – essential in a country where summer temperatures can top 40 °C.

The stud’s mares and a small herd of geldings who provide hacks for guests live out in the estate’s rolling grasslands – any human visitors to the mares and foals’ lakeside domain are liable to be “attacked with cuddles” – and the stallions have the use of eight turn-out paddocks.

There are three schools: a main 20x60m arena with mirrors, a covered 20x40m outdoor arena, both of which are also used for guest lessons, and an indoor school. The latter is directly accessible from the family living room. It is used for lungeing, working the younger horses and for the competition horses to enjoy the odd hooley safely. In summer, the horses work early and late in the day to avoid the heat.

JOÃO and Equador have spent time training with Carl Hester, first to prepare for Hickstead and again ahead of the Europeans, and it has influenced João’s day-to-day approach.

“The way Carl sees horses and how he works with them really opened my eyes,” he explains.

“I already had a good role model in my trainer here, Coralie Baldrey. She’s talented and has always instilled a positive way of working in me, but some people in Portugal are sometimes not as positive in their training. They see what the horse cannot do as much as what it can.



Above: “You see the way they ride and the way they teach the horse, and think, ‘One day I’ll learn to be like that!’” – João’s humility has helped him learn hugely from time with Carl Hester. Below: in the main arena at MVL



Monte Velho is not only João’s base but also a renowned Lusitano stud, and the broodmares and foals live out in the expansive grazing lands

TEAM WORK

A TOTAL of 56 horses live at Monte Velho. They are João’s five-strong competition squad; 16 horses – stallions, mares and geldings – who provide lessons to guests; eight geldings for hacks and the breeding mares plus their foals.

A permanent team of seven people keeps things ticking over smoothly. On the training side, João is joined by Coralie, Lorena Faben and Nuño Neves while three grooms care for the horses, assisted by one or two interns.

The day starts at 7am with feeds and hay, with further feeds at midday and 5.30pm, for all horses except Equador, who has five feeds a day “to be more efficient for his system”. The feeds are manufactured by Portugal’s leading brand, Intacol.

All horses have ad-lib hay when stabled; as the property’s soil isn’t suitable for hay production, rye grass hay is bought in.

Supplements, such as vitamin E, are used chiefly for the competition horses.



“Carl’s horsemanship is so positive: he believes in the horses no matter how tricky they may be. He looks after their mental health, and we’ve implemented some of his methods. For example, in Portugal there are many stallions, who are not always turned out, but ours spend time in the paddocks each day.”

João’s attitude also helped him to finesse his approach to ridden work, as he reaped the rewards of throwing himself into his time in the UK.

“I was nervous at first, but Carl is kind and was a good example to me. I thought, ‘I want to be that sort of rider and that type of horseman.’

“And now I train in the arena four, maybe five, times a week, not more; the rest of the time we go for a hack.”

“João’s system is quite different from many riders in Portugal,” adds Diogo. “Many grand prix riders here start teaching collection quite early, but João waited until Equador was seven.

Monte Velho is distinctively Portuguese. The indoor school (above and right) provides respite from the summer sun for the young competition horses as they are worked

COUDELARIA do Monte Velho, MVL’s stud, has produced not only the majority of João’s competition horses but also Amy Woodhead’s ride Esquadra MVL and Irish Olympian Anna Merveldt’s partner at the 2019 Rotterdam Europeans, Esporim.

As in the competition arena, Equador is the star of the breeding programme – and “of course, his stud fees help to finance the project,” says Diogo. He passes on his easy character, uphill conformation and good gaits to his progeny.

“Lusitanos have a mental strength you don’t see in other horses; and a rideability and willingness to please the rider,” adds Diogo.

And Equador’s cool head is apparent. His stud schedule is planned carefully around



“When the bell goes, I pat him and tell him, ‘Let’s go, let’s do it’... and he does”

ON THE MOMENTS BEFORE STARTING A TEST WITH EQUADOR

“The differences in the horses influence this. A Lusitano is typically weaker than a warmblood, and you really need to work on the topline.”

João continues: “Here I ride just Lusitanos, and I learnt a lot from riding warmbloods. Lusitanos give their best and have the talent for collection, but can lack athleticism and you really need to take care of the balance. I can see and feel that warmbloods are completely bred for the sport – they are very good athletes, and it was so nice to feel the balance and the big movement.”

competitions, but “he would allow us to take semen and compete the next day, or even train straight away with a mare – he just says ‘OK’”, remarks João.

Equador’s son Maestro will begin his own breeding career this year.

AS for all potential team riders, the postponement of the Tokyo Games was a bitter blow for João, but he is philosophical.

“At the beginning it was difficult, because it is the dream of your life,” he muses. “I was

ready for 2020. A lot can happen in one year – horses can be injured, another rider might be better than me.

“But, if it is something you cannot change, you just have to live with it and keep working.

“This extra year could be a good thing for us because Equador feels better than ever. We have both improved and I am getting more confident at this level.

“I’ve always felt that special connection with Equador. I’m like him. I’m lucky that I don’t suffer badly with nerves – maybe a bit just before I get on – and Equador is comfortable at competitions. I’m reserved, but when I’m riding I like to be in the spotlight, and he really performs in the arena. When the bell goes I pat him and tell him, ‘Let’s go, let’s do it’... and he does.”

The work behind the scenes at MVL – with the support of a 12-strong team including owners, trainers, vet and physio – that help horse and rider produce those performances.

As João says, “In the test, I can’t change anything. If I need to do something, it is when I am training at home. In that moment in the arena, I just need to give my best.”

And behind the undeniable teamwork that gets them to that point lies the partnership between horse and rider. João and Equador MVL have learned, trained and grown together. Hopefully they will soon get to give their best on the biggest stage of all. **H&H**

Pictures by Karen Chaplin, Bruno Barata and Briony Reed