

# Vaulting: Gymnastics on Horseback!

An introduction by Star Hughes, coach of EqueStarz Vaulters

**Vaulting, gymnastics on horseback**, is an ideal group sport for kids and teens, combining skills and thrills while encouraging strict safety standards. In a progressive program of stretches, strength training, and moves mastery, vaulting brings together the lyric grace of dance, the flexibility of gymnastics, and the tensile strength of the true athlete. Horse ownership and riding experience is not a prerequisite to this equestrian lifestyle.

**Vaulting differs in a big way from ordinary athletics**, gymnastics and dance because the prime motivator, the premier partner, best friend, favorite teacher, and most popular coach, is a horse! One vaulting horse is mount and mentor to several kids. Patience, persistence, strength, skill, grace of movement, and the rhythm of riding are imparted by the educated vaulting horse to the human students.

**Vaulting is a sport suitable for both girls and boys**, even very young ones, because it plays to individual styles and strengths. Practiced as a group activity, the sport showcases each individual rider. Everyone discovers a specialty within his or her personal expertise. Though students are encouraged to aspire to a high standard, vaulting can be fun and rewarding from the very beginning and at every level. There is no time crunch to successful learning.

**Seven compulsory, individual moves are practiced by each vaulter**, at each session. These static and dynamic exercises provide a base for expansion into a more complicated or challenging routine, put to music, called a kur. Each vaulter can choose from many moves in his choreography and add music to suit an individual style. Using a variety of music, from classics to hip-hop, vaulters can create kurs exciting to watch and fun to do, for teammates, competitions, and/or special performances. Imagination has no limits!

**A full team includes eight or more vaulters**, one or two horses, a longeur, and a coach. As a team, vaulters ride with partners, for performances. Each team member also performs solo. The camaraderie of a common cause and shared spirit naturally creates strong support among team members for one another and for their essential partner, the team horse. The vaulter develops a keen sense of responsibility for self and others. Friendly competition is the rule, rather than the exception, in vaulting, whether at home practice or performing at the Nationals.

**Good safety practices** are taught and enforced, both on the ground and while working on and around the horses. Vaulting is documented as the safest equestrian sport, and that is no accident! Fewer strains and sprains result from equestrian vaulting activities than do from standard gymnastics. Vaulting moves are first tried out on the stationary “barrel horse” before riders attempt them on the real horse. This saves wear and tear on everyone involved. A useful session can be spent just working out moves on the barrel horse.

**Staff size varies;** ideally, one coach supervises stretching and barrel work, while another directs vaulters riding the horse, allowing the longeur to concentrate on the horse. In between turns on the horse, vaulters go back to practice on the barrel or watch and help other vaulters. For small groups, the coach may also serve as the longeur, while an experienced vaulter assists with other duties. All of the kids on the team share the responsibility of caring for the vaulting horse and the equipment.

**The vaulting horse** travels in a circle about 18 meters in circumference, at the end of a lunge line, controlled by the longeur, who stands in the center. The horse and longeur agree to a set of signals to determine the gait and speed suitable for each level vaulter and appropriate to the exercise involved. The rider is free to concentrate on his security, body control and position without the concern of steering and cuing the horse. This naturally develops the ideal “independent seat” so necessary for all types of successful riding. Moves can be first performed at a walk or trot, progressing, later, to a canter.

**Contrary to expectations,** the ability to vault on is not a requirement for beginners. Rather, the beginners, or small students, get a boost from an adult helper or a taller, more experienced vaulter. As skills and strength increase, kids learn how to “punch” and jump up and on, unassisted. However, ways to make a safe dismount are taught from the very first ride. Beginners are “spotted” during their moves until they feel confident on their own. It usually doesn’t take long for even the shyest child to begin enjoying chances to show off!

**Equipment for vaulting** requires a specially designed surcingle (bellyband) fitted snugly around the horse’s girth, over a comfortable pad, with two reinforced handles at the top for the rider to hold onto. The horse wears a snaffle bridle with sidereins attached to the surcingle. The lunge line is attached to the bit. The longeur, wearing gloves, directs the horse by means of the long whip in one hand and the line in the other.

**The rider’s basic practice equipment** includes comfortable athletic clothes, simple gymnastic shoes, and for beginners-- always-- a safety helmet! Advanced vaulters, also for reasons of safety, do not wear helmets. By the time a vaulter is capable of doing headstands on a moving horse, he has no more need of a helmet that may unbalance the head or limit vision, having acquired the necessary body control to mount, perform, and dismount, safely.

**An appropriate area** for vaulting practice includes mats on soft ground for stretching and to put a vaulting barrel, an enclosed arena with footing cushioned enough for the vaulting horse to work on and for vaulters to dismount safely, and bathroom facilities. An indoor arena, with a warm room to do barrel practice, is wonderful during winter work. Even in less than ideal conditions, often, much can be accomplished, as long as safety is not compromised.

**The benefits of vaulting for kids are many.** Improved physical abilities include strength, balance, suppleness, timing, and rhythm. Mental ability to reason, imagine, plan, prepare, and control keep pace with physical development. Emotional issues respond to self-discipline, self-esteem grows with a willing boldness. Socially appropriate behavior becomes second nature. Of course, it takes time, effort, dedication, and a system to accomplish set goals. Vaulting is ideal as a sport practiced all year round. Its philosophy can become a lifetime model.

**Opportunities to demonstrate vaulting skills** include special exhibitions and demonstrations provided at horse shows, rodeos, schools, and the like. Vaulting can be practiced as a sport and end, in itself, or as a base or complement to other styles of riding. It can be for private entertainment and recreation, only, or performed for competitions. Most of all, at every level, it's a fun, exciting, and unique sport available to those who dream of a chance to ride horses and team up with good friends.

*For more information on vaulting, please visit the national website:  
[www.americanvaulting.org](http://www.americanvaulting.org)*

*Colorado director for vaulting education is Noel Martonovich of Golden Gate Vaulters. She may be reached by phone: # 303-277-0356 or email: [Nmartonovi@aol.com](mailto:Nmartonovi@aol.com)*

*Douglas/Elbert/Arapahoe County area vaulting information: Star Hughes, EqueStarz Vaulters. Phone: #720-851-4925 or email: [equestar@rkymtnhi.com](mailto:equestar@rkymtnhi.com)  
Website: [www.EquesTraining.com](http://www.EquesTraining.com)*

*About the author:*

Star Hughes is a riding instructor and horse trainer of many years experience. Having grown up showing saddleseat horses, hunters, and barrel racing, she appreciates many different styles of riding and breeds of horses. She is certified by the American Riding Instructor's Association in dressage and recreational riding, and by the North American Riding for the Handicapped Association, in physical and mental disabilities. She is an active member of the Equine Assisted Growth and Learning Association, and a Tellington-Touch Equine Awareness Practitioner. Star promotes vaulting for children and adults as an ideal way to develop capable, confident riders.

