

3 *How to train your vaulting horse*

Criteria for a good vaulting horse

Don't start training a horse which is not suitable. The criteria for a good vaulting horse are outlined below.

- Make sure you train a horse which you are able to keep for a while. Training this horse will require a good deal of effort, time and patience, so make sure the owner does not sell him as soon as he is trained! It will take approximately half a year before you can truly start to 'vault' on a new horse, and it is really discouraging to a team never to be able to show their best abilities, because they keep having to start out on a new, untrained horse.
- Make sure your horse is not a pensioner! 'Good temperament' should not mean that your horse is too tired to protest. You want active cooperation from your horse, as vaulting is a strenuous job, and your horse should be young (but fully grown) and strong.
- The horse must have a suitable temperament; don't train a very nervous, excitable horse. He must like children, be reasonably calm even under noisy conditions (music, clapping at horse shows and in unknown environments) and generally have a friendly disposition.
- Choose the correct size and strength for the age of vaulters. If you plan to train teams with several teenagers (fifteen years and up), don't start on a small pony.
- Your horse must be *long* enough in the back to accommodate three almost grown-up bodies. He must have a relatively

insensitive back to accept the feet and knees of the vaulters all along his back, be *strong* enough to support their weight, have a *chest wide* enough for large lungs and heart to be able to do the job (up to 15 min. canter under three vaulters!), have *legs strong* and healthy enough to support him in this, a *neck long & strong* enough for the exercises in front of the surcingle, *hooves* hard and large enough for the weight and work, and a *croup* flat enough securely to accommodate a standing vaulter.

- The horse should have suitable capability of balance and collection. Some horses have, although their bodies look ideal for vaulting, great difficulty in ever learning a collected canter. Many heavy horses, for example, as wide as they are, can only canter at a fast pace, which can make them highly unsuitable for vaulting.

How to start training the inexperienced horse

We will not assume here that you attempt to train a horse which is not saddle broken. Your horse must have been ridden and must have learned to sustain all the basic gaits, walk, trot and canter, in an even and balanced manner. We assume he is used to being lunged. (See chapter 7 about correct lunging.) So there are three basic things left that the horse must learn on top of what he knows already:

that vaulters come running towards him and this does not mean a threat or demand to stop

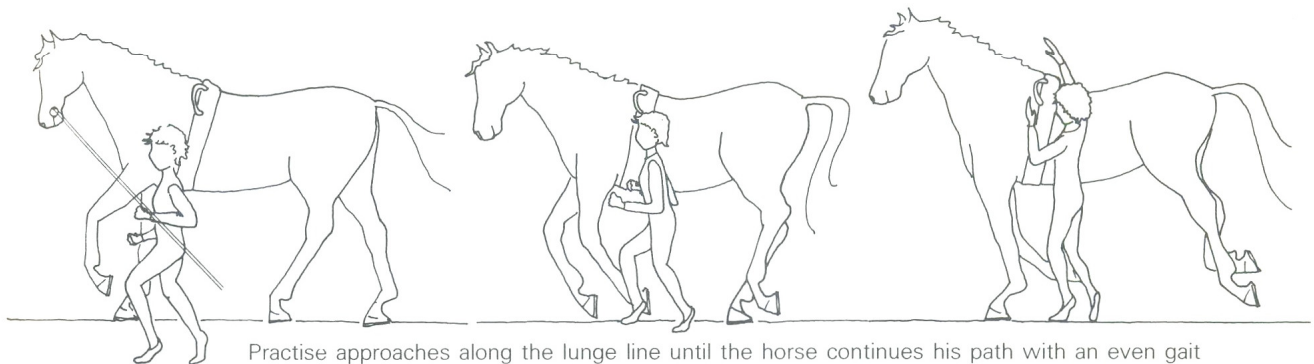
that vaulters will mount while the horse keeps running and then shift their weight in curious ways — and this does not mean a fall (and therefore does not mean the horse has to stop)

that more than one person will be on his back at one time

On top of that he will learn:

that he must stay on the prescribed circle without falling in or pulling out
that he may never speed up or slow down, but keep an even pace
that he must react to voice aids promptly and accurately
to recognize a fall and help protect the children by never stepping on them

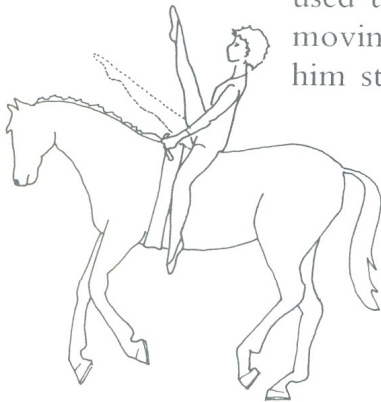
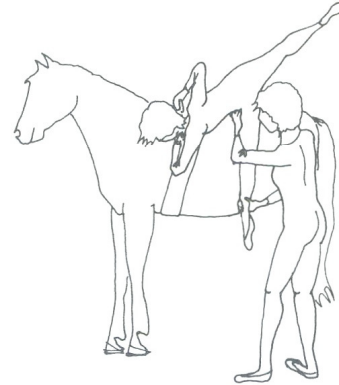
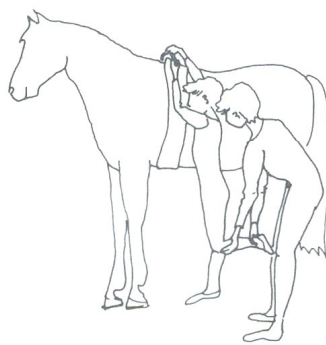
First teach your horse that you wish him to continue walking on his circle at an even pace, when someone approaches him. He will stop – expecting you to mount or give him a treat! If he stops, take him by the side reins and make him walk on. When he does it correctly, pat him and praise him. If he is very shy of vaulters approaching him, let them approach only half way along the lunge at first and then retreat back to the centre. Once the horse is used to this procedure (an activity around him to which he is expected *not* to react!) in walk, do it at trot. Let your vaulter run along, praising and patting the horse. Always make sure that the vaulter approaches the correct way along the lunge line, so the horse can plainly see what will happen.



Practise approaches along the lunge line until the horse continues his path with an even gait

When you let your first vaulter mount, let someone give him a leg-up so the weight shifts are minimized. The vaulter then may start to accustom the horse to weight shifts by passing a leg over the front gently, back and forth, and with pauses of balanced seat in between. Lots of praising for the horse, if he tolerates this

Give a 'leg-up' to minimize weight shifts



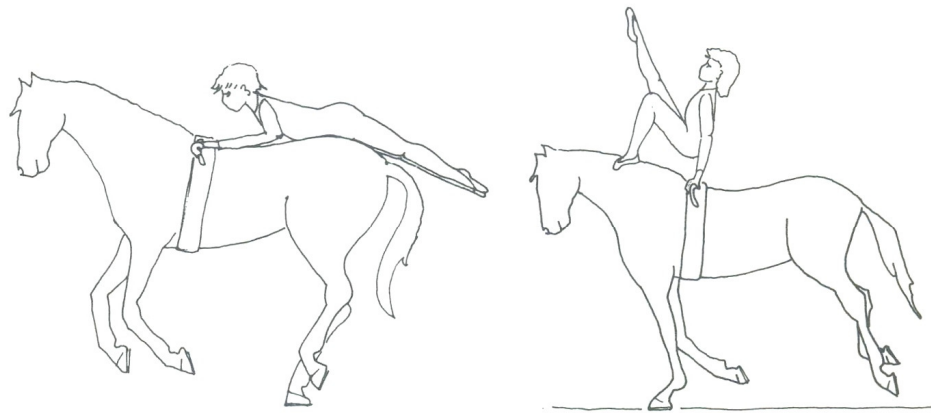
Practise simple leg swings

without stopping! Remember that he is trying to be nice by stopping, when he feels you falling – because that is what these strange weight shifts will mean to him in the beginning. Get him used to dismounts (via leg over the front), so he gets used to moving on while vaulters slide on and off his back. Don't let him stop! Now you progress into the other exercises: the mill, some kneeling. If possible, you should always use your best vaulters for training a new horse, as they are most balanced and least disturbing to him.

Once you feel that the horse relaxes and accepts these exercises, you can move into trot. Use patience and try to think like your horse: he will probably not refuse because he is unwilling, but because he is truly confused about what is going on his back. Remember how a trained horse in dressage is taught to react to the slightest weight shifts of the rider, and to recognize them as aids, that is as commands that mean something which is expected of him. Our vaulting horse presumably learned some dressage to be able to sustain even paces, collect himself and react to aids via reins and bridle. Now you want him *not* to react to weight shifts any more – naturally he is confused! Explain to him patiently what you want of him – repetition of course is the answer to this. Don't get frustrated, because it takes so long – the more thoroughly and lovingly you teach him now, the better your vaulting horse will be in the future.

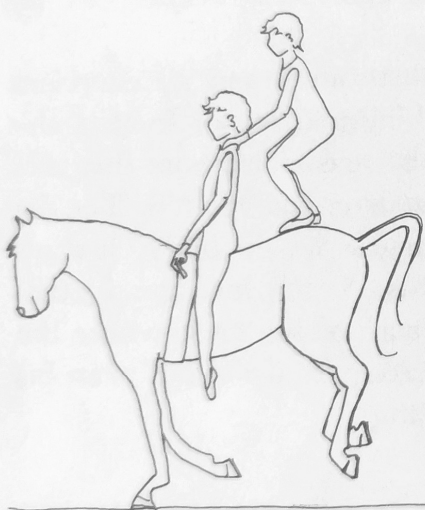
Try to keep in mind what the horse can and cannot see about the things you are doing on his back. Swinging legs are confusing, because the horse catches the feet whizzing by just out of the corner of his eye. Things that can't be clearly seen often seem threatening. Since the horse is an animal which seeks safety by running away, he may therefore spook and charge. Approaching towards the hindquarters of the horse (instead of along the lunge), and falls and high dismounts to the rear fall into the category of exercises which will make the inexperienced horse spook, and should therefore be put off until he is well used to other vaulting activities. Don't punish the horse for spooking if you scared him – reassure him instead and repeat the situation in a milder form until he understands that such events can be considered 'normal' in vaulting.

It goes without saying that roll dismounts and all exercises which involve landing next to the hindquarters or behind the horse must be avoided until you can be reasonably sure that this horse will never intentionally kick out after the vaulters. Let the vaulters move, press, touch the horse's whole body, always accompanied by pats and good words. Teach him gently that you intend not only to occupy the part of his back where the saddle used to be, but his neck and croup as well, and even his sides, when you go into a cossack hang!



We use him from croup to neck

Let vaulters mount in trot. Repeat all the exercises you have done in walk. Check if the horse seems comfortable with this. Move on to canter, but leave out all exercises that comprise big swings (like the scissors and the flank) to the very last. When you get your horse used to those, let them be done only by vaulters who are experienced enough to come down very gently ('like on a raw egg'). Always keep in mind that there is not much you can do, once your horse gets 'his back up' against vaulting and decides to become 'unsuitable'! You *must* train him in such a way that he comes out of every vaulting session with the feeling: this was not too bad and worth it for the praise and treats...



Get him used to weight on the croup

You will progress into double and triple exercises basically along the same lines, as you will have trained your vaulters: from low and safe to higher and more precarious. *Never* built up higher exercises until you can be sure of the horse's tolerance of this! If your horse reacts adversely to some positions (like standing on the croup), repeat it again and again with safe vaulters (who know how to jump off) and give lots of praise when the horse tolerates it.

Give your horse a good variety of activities. Don't use him exclusively for vaulting, just because he did you the favour of becoming patient and tolerant. Remember how one-sided and demanding vaulting is, and that a horse detests boredom just like you. The best activities are the ones emphasizing balance and action of the hindquarters (such as cavaletti work and basic dressage), and working up stamina (rides in the countryside).

Switch leads frequently while training an inexperienced horse. All the running to and from the horse can be done on whatever side, and in my opinion it does not hurt the vaulters either to experience some variety! Mounts on the 'wrong' side (that is the right lead) will prepare them for outside mounts done on the left

lead later. Make sure you let the 'new' vaulting horse stretch in between the short working periods! Take the side reins off frequently, so your horse does not fall into the mistake of cramping up his back, which will result in back pain and make him unwilling to work for you. Unless you have significant problems restraining your horse on the lunge in the beginning, always do the warm-up without side reins at all: you want the horse relaxed and in full use of his back musculature.

When you can see that the horse's attention is not with you any more, introduce something new to capture his attention again: often a change in direction will do the trick. And don't overestimate your horse's attention span either. For a young horse half an hour is plenty; he won't learn more after that. It is better to train a young horse more frequently, but in shorter exercise periods, than to try to grind him down into obedience by getting him tired. An unwilling horse is not a good vaulting horse.