

6 *The vaulter's parents*

Parents, as every child can tell you, can be a great interference – but are also your greatest support! Parents can be involved in many ways, from promoting the sport in general, to helping with the organization of events (especially stable competitions), and they will likely have to take on duties such as costume making. It is important that the parents see this sport as beneficial to the mental and physical health and development of their children, so the improvements in these directions should be pointed out to them when warranted. The parents of the more ambitious children can also be a valuable direct help in the training if they are willing to learn the rules and regulations of this sport. A great number of the vaulting parents of my teams have regularly attended my workshops on judging and instructing vaulting, and several are now certified judges and deeply involved in the promotion of our sport.

Parents of beginning vaulters must learn what to expect from the sport as well as from the coach. There must be a basic trust between the parents and the trainer. I advise parents to watch a training session before letting their children try with me. They may have watched the performance of your show team, but not know how you start out the beginners. They may not like your training style: they may think that you push the young vaulters too fast into certain exercises – while you think that this is necessary to keep the interest going. They may think that you are too slow in your training, that the children should learn certain things faster – when you are making sure that they are really secure in what they are doing, before moving onto the next level. Some may tell you that their children ‘are just not

used to discipline yet'. Ask them if they mean they should not *have* to submit to discipline. If so, they cannot train with me. I am responsible for their safety during vaulting and I cannot ensure safety without discipline. Or does it mean they have simply so far not encountered any in their lives, because the parents are too soft? It's never too late to start, but beware: do those parents plan to interfere and teach you how you ought to coach vaulters – something they usually know nothing about?

The trainer and the parents must work together. This means that it is clearly established who has authority where. Parents should not be in the ring while training is going on (except for picture taking sessions and so on with permission of the trainer) and should not counteract the trainer's discipline and authority. (If they feel you're negligent in your care, they should talk to you privately, not in front of the children.) When they undermine your authority in the ring, they undermine the safety of their own children.

Normally all this is no problem. But what happens when the child has his first fall? You have pointed out before that falls *will* happen. A fall does not mean an accident (in the training section of this book we will elaborate on the difference and discuss how to prepare for falls). A fall simply means losing your balance and experiencing an involuntary dismount. The toddler in diapers does it on the ground, the beginning vaulter does it on or off a horse. But parents can make it *seem* like an accident, if they storm into the ring, start shouting and shedding tears. First falls can very easily be misinterpreted.

The likelihood that the child is hurt, especially when falling from an exercise in walk, is very minor. Children are flexible and the ground is soft (if you are training on grass, more precautions must be taken). But the child does experience a little shock: it is a strange feeling to fall from that height and it looks scary, *if* the more experienced trainer and the more experienced parents (who *must* know, because they are older) react scared!

In case of a fall, parents should stay out of the ring until called

in. The trainer should collect the child, check for injury (you have absorbed your First Aid Course) and reassure him or her. He will cry his tears, you will dry them away, and praise the vaulter for his good example to the team, if they dry up fast. Take the child in your arms – hugging is so reassuring – then stop talking about it and start explaining *why* the fall happened: whether the horse tripped, or whether it was the vaulter's fault and how to avoid it next time. If the child is scared after that, let him have a rest. Don't let mother drag him home, if nothing is wrong. Let him sit in the ring and watch the rest of the session, he may join in again by himself. The attention of the team will do the best job of healing and rebuilding confidence. They will all tell him how it was when they fell for the first time – and so the new child will learn that a fall is part of the game and nothing to be made a drama of.

In case of injury you of course involve the parents immediately, but keeping a handle on panic. Show reassurance in your bearing and keep your calm. If the parent is too shaken, offer somebody or yourself to drive them to the doctor. The trainer should preferably stay with the team, and discuss the incident with them. They have witnessed it, it scared them too, and they have to get it out of their system by talking about it. Don't down-play it, but don't let them dramatize it either. Finish the session by asking them all to do some familiar exercise in walk. Don't let them run off without taking proper care of the horse. Everything should stay as normal as always, and things will fall into perspective. (Check Appendix A on Insurance questions on how and when to give first aid.)

Some children are so used to getting away with drama that they will stage quite a show for your benefit. If kicking and screaming starts – let the parents have the child and get him off the premises (always assuming you *did* make sure that nothing was wrong and it *is* a temper tantrum). Don't let him upset the whole team! Observe that child in the next session, if he ever comes back (those children usually don't...) and talk to the

parents about this unacceptable behaviour. If the parents don't agree to staying out of the ring, question their trust in you. Either they *do* trust you, or they should not entrust their child to you – they have to make up their mind.

When the parents pick up their child after the training (if they have not watched the session), mention the fall to them. They should always hear these things from you, so they get the story straight, but also because some children will not admit to having twisted their foot slightly for instance, and parents should be able to follow up at home. If ever the parents get the feeling that you are trying to 'keep the danger from them', they will lose trust in you and you will lose your most valuable support.

Some parents want to make sure that their child is closest and dearest to your heart – show them right from the start that you are impartial. Don't go for politicking; the children will detect it immediately! Children don't get 'better' exercises in a show, because the parents are nice enough to support the club generously. Children don't get extra attention, because they have a history of a weakness or sickness or other. (Of course you take into account if a child has a health problem – but you don't favour them for it!) If a child is so sick that he *does* need special care, that child's place is not on a vaulting team. It is too risky. If a child is so spoiled or shy that she needs special care – you are not running a day-care, and the shyness will most likely be taken care of by the other children.

In case of misbehaviour or disruption of the team, keep your freedom to expel that child from the team temporarily or remove him from the show team into the junior one. Prepare the way for this in a way so you don't lose the parents' support, explain that you are doing it for the sake of safety in the sport. Surely nobody can argue with that.