

## 9 *Planning training sessions*

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Basic knowledge of sport psychology can make your training so much more enjoyable and the results better and faster. Since vaulting is a sport where a lack of self confidence contributes to potential danger, it is important to arrange your training so this courage and confidence can grow in a realistic and natural manner.

### *Objectives to be endorsed by trainer and vaulter*

- To develop sport skills, improve health and fitness, emphasize the general obligation an athlete has toward his body: this means healthy food, no smoking, no drugs of course! But it also means improving your vaulting by exercising in other sports as well: swimming, jogging, jazz dancing – it all ties in with a good vaulting performance.
- To have fun, form friendships: the social aspect is the easiest one to achieve, as vaulting parties and sleep-overs, picnics and travel together are rarely turned down! Arrange carpooling in a way so the children don't always get pulled out of the stables straight after the practice session – if the stable management will allow them to hang around for a while. Looking for lost horseshoes in the paddocks together can be quite as 'bonding' for the team mates as the practice itself, and often they need something other than vaulting to decrease tensions which may have come up during training.
- To acquire the interest and desire to stay active, and participate in something meaningful: nothing is worse for a teenager than

just hanging around at the Seven Eleven with nothing to do! With shows and competitions scheduled during the season the desire to show off and *be* somebody can be very positively fulfilled – there is no need to attract attention by getting into trouble. Active involvement in a sport is the best way to keep youngsters away from drugs, alcohol, smokes and undesirable characters, and the ambition to stay on the show team (which also depends on good behaviour around all others involved) will be an incentive to show at least minimum discipline...

- To find the sense of accomplishment through individual improvement: to recognize this you just have to look at how the kids arrange their trophies and ribbons! And this is an important reason why those should be handed out (preferably down to fifth or eight place). If not enough competitions can be scheduled in your area, due to lack of opportunity of finding anyone to compete against, create your own 'award system'. There always must be a goal to work toward. And this goal must be attainable by the individual vaulter.
- To gain personal satisfaction and well-being: part of that is the sense of accomplishment, but the other part is that with correct training the children will actually feel fitter, stronger and generally more energetic.
- To balance work and play: interject 'play sessions' even for the older vaulters, especially after they have trained hard for the show season or a competition. Let them choose what new things they would like to try out, even if you know that this will not work. Just make sure they don't attempt anything dangerous! But a play session, where every single exercise collapses, can be a lot of amusement. Don't take it out on the horse, however! Let the collapses happen on the barrel...
- To teach desirable values (cooperation, honesty etc.): always show your appreciation when good cooperation happens! Make it known that you notice: don't present the desirable behaviour

as glowing examples of virtue to the others, who don't behave that way yet; keep it light. A remark like 'there she is again, just when I need her – how did you guess?' with a smile and a pat on the back will do the trick very nicely. Hopefully the others will notice as well and follow suit. If they choose not to notice, make it clear that it would be quite stupid of you to take the misbehaving ones onto your next fun trip – why invite more work and trouble than necessary? They don't want to volunteer their efforts – why should you?

- To teach personal adjustments: adaptability, sociability, team spirit, self esteem, self reliance, responsibility for others and an animal etc. Give them responsibilities early on; if not they will get the impression that there is a way to get around the jobs at hand. There isn't: if you are part of the team, it is equal rights and responsibilities for all. Some will be better with the horse, never forgetting that he might need water – even in the best moments of their personal glory after a show. Others will have the talent to keep track of your baby vaulters, who always run off at the most inopportune moment, because they have to go to the bathroom. Some are punctual and can be the 'time keeper' for the team; assemble them at the right time and right spot when needed. There is a place for everyone on a team to show their worth. The building of the team spirit cannot be overestimated; it is a most valuable learning experience. Make them observe the other teams and note good or undesirable behaviour (they have a much sharper eye for the competing team than for themselves...). This way they can learn how bad a bad loser looks – and how good a friendly helping hand from the 'enemy team'! And how wonderful it is to belong to a team which really sticks together.
- To give them the chance to develop respect (for each other, the horse, the trainer, the lunge, the promoters of an event etc.), as well as trust, confidence, and knowledge: give them opportunity to put themselves in the trainer's place sometimes,



and explain the promoter's concerns around a show. Discuss the difficulties of the judges' job (and how judging errors might occur despite the best intentions, because fatigue sets in after a few hours) and let them judge some videos – that really drives the point home!

- To teach them to be a good sportsman, honest and fair, a gracious winner and a good loser. For this you as the trainer must be the first example!

### *Self image of the young vaulter*

Self image is *learned*. It is moulded by the reaction of others and is a reflection of how the child thinks s/he is being perceived from the outside. It is susceptible to change (any vaulting team has teenagers in puberty!), but immensely important for team work and performance.

A positive self image must first be developed, before it can be emanated to the spectators. You want to teach your vaulters that reflecting the confidence, ease and charm of this sport is part of the achievement – as in any show sport!

We actually train for this kind of body language: when the little vaulters first mount onto the barrel horse (and later the horse) make them hold out their arms directly after the mount and shout out their name. They should announce themselves as if this was their presentation to the spectators 'here I am, and I'm worth looking at!' Because if they are not convinced of this, why should anyone want to look at them? It is in the beginning very difficult to make a timid little vaulter shout anything at all...but when they *do*, you will immediately see their posture change! You can't proudly shout out your name with a rounded back and a slumping head while contemplating your belly button...

Self image can be deceiving and wrong even when it is not negative. If you can, let the vaulters train in front of a mirror (maybe there is one installed in the riding ring, or you can put

one up next to the barrel), and/or film them on video, if a camera is available. The kids enjoy this tremendously – and it *does* get the point across, when you stop the picture and they can *see* all the faults, which they never quite believed they *have*.

Self image affects motivation, learning ability and performance, the personal relationships the team makes with the coach and others, as well as personal and life satisfaction. The trainer influences it by his/her way of accepting the vaulter, as athlete and as person, and by his/her management style of the training and critiquing. If clarity, fairness, consistency and a supportive and caring atmosphere prevail, you will hopefully see trust, a sense of responsibility and respect in return. It is mostly true that you will get the results you expect!

### *Don't overemphasize winning*

One of the nice things about vaulting is that it is in most clubs more a show sport than a competition issue at this point. Competition does something very valuable to the motivation of the vaulters: it really gets them going! But even small stable competitions, as long as other clubs are involved, will do for that purpose. When competition gets more serious (which we hope we will also achieve over the next few years) take care to avoid its negative aspects:

- loss of enjoyment: if goals are set too high and unattainable, the sport loses all the fun and becomes work only; the result is loss of confidence and self esteem
- restricted participation: the lesser skilled may be eliminated, although they may be valuable in terms of team cohesion, personal fun etc.
- undesirable behaviour may result from feeling overtaxed: cheating, blaming others, complaining etc. may be tried to compensate for perceived 'failure'
- poor performance may result from high anxiety level

- the total, personal and physical development of the athlete may be restricted

## *Plan your sessions*

Your training sessions should not turn into a boring routine, although it is important to learn many things through repetition. Use variation in your approach.

*Creative mixing:* Overall goals (such as creating your own club, getting a show team together, planning competitions, creating team spirit, going on shows outside the home stable etc.) must be interrelated with specific goals. These must be realistic, achievable and measurable in their success. They can be goals for the day, non-skill related ('no negative words between the team members today') or for the foreseeable future and skill related ('in three weeks we'll all be able to do that in canter') and any combination of these.

- Give equal opportunities to all vaulters most times.
- Then give opportunity for individual activities: a vaulter wants to find out what s/he can do as a 'single star'.
- Then combine them with a partner: compose *pas-de-deux* routines, which they can perform with a close friend.
- Move to team: the cooperative approach. Make clear to them that success of an exercise depends on best performance of *all* involved. Point out that if the exercise fails, they must help each other more. Instill pride in the undermen that you trust them with the life of your flyer. Instill pride in your flyer by teaching him/her to make it easy for the undermen – the team will do the rest! Every underman loves a flyer who can sustain him/herself!
- Simulate competition: mark your vaulters, make them give scores to each other. Teach them the judging rules. Plan strategies of how to avoid deductions in a competition. Teach

good tactical approaches to improve a performance.

- Simulate clinics: video your vaulters and discuss their exercises with them, while they watch themselves.
- Train for a show, involve them in the costume design.
- Train for 'impression of the group' with run-ins, bows and/or more flashy displays and pyramids etc.
- After competitions and big shows: let them relax, order free play time. Ask them which new exercises they would like to try (this gives you an excellent insight into their ability to assess their own performance level). Put them up to new things you expect them to be able to take on.
- Let them play 'trainer'. Let them mark their team mates: this will give you an insight into their fairness, their knowledge, their perception, their personal dislikes and favourites. Let them judge you: you may learn something from their criticism and it could turn into a really funny session!
- Let them organize a 'parent vaulting night', complete with drawings for the invitation, the creation of funny medals to hand out (Fimo will do fine!), and their own 'evaluation rules'. We had hard hats, huge pillows, ropes and rope ladders for the protection of the vaulting parents – it was great fun, and the kids were very proud that none of the parents could do what they could do...

