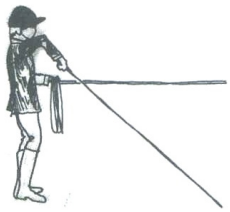
15 *Approach to the horse and mount*

Correct approach and mount are part of the first compulsory exercise of each block, or of each exercise, if performed individually. They are marked into the exercises and therefore very important. The trainer should never let sloppiness pass in approach, mounts and dismounts, but rather explain that the vaulter's 'job' starts with the approach and ends with the running out after the dismount. The basic things in vaulting as well as the whole attitude of your vaulters toward their own performance can not be expected to change three weeks before a competition, but rather must be so familiar to your vaulters that they execute them correctly without thinking about them. In a competition or show they have so many other things to think of! And especially your smaller vaulters will not be able to retain more than three important points in their memory under the pressure or excitement of a show. As the driver of a car must be expected to step on the brakes as a reflex from eye to foot in case of an emergency, bypassing a complicated thinking process, so the vaulter must put his best into each mount, point his toes always, and assume correct seat position in between exercises as a matter of second nature.



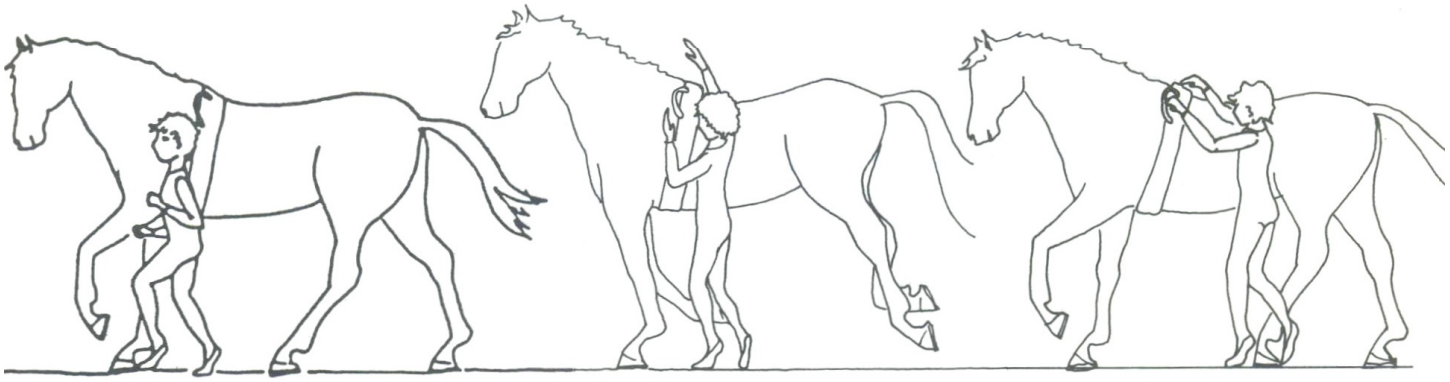
With inexperienced horses keep the whip down when 'opening the gate'

The approach

The approach sets the tone for a correct mount. And a wrong approach can set your horse off at a speed, so the vaulter may never catch up with it and get a chance to mount. . . We mentioned before how the lunger 'opens the gate' to let the vaulter pass. The vaulter then approaches the horse along the lunge line, in

the same gait as the horse. The vaulter must never approach from the back. First of all, there is a chance of getting side-kicked by the horse's hind leg, but this is usually also an effect of the following: The horse is a 'flight animal', and this means that anything which seems dangerous or insecure to him will set him running. A vaulter approaching from the back can't be clearly seen by the horse; he might just catch a glimpse of him from the corner of his eye. This can spook him! Also the way from the back is longer, and smaller vaulters will never catch up with the horse that way!

The vaulter's shoulders must face the same way as the shoulders of the horse. This means that the vaulter does not aim straight for the surcingle, but runs *with* the horse *while* approaching. Head is erect and eyes to the front. Emphasize erect and elegant posture (back straight, head up, chest out, shoulders back and down) and correct arm position in the approach. The vaulter's arms should be held calmly, yet not in a stiff line along the body, but rather swing in a natural movement with the motion of walking or running. Excessive waving of the arms during the approach irritates the horse.

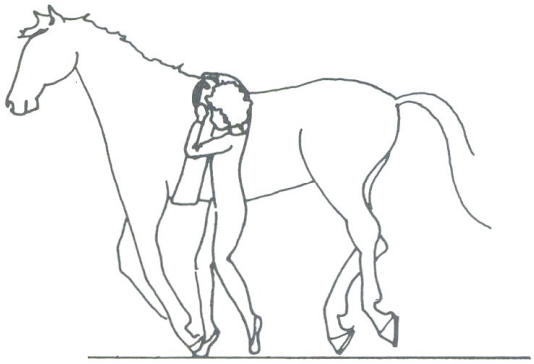


Correct approach to the horse: vaulter is on the same lead and in step with the horse, facing the direction of travel. Approach sideways in direction of horse's shoulder, arms in natural running position, head erect

Vaulter reaches for the grips without exaggerated or showy arm movements

Incorrect approach: vaulter does not run along lungeline, but approaches too far back. Arms are 'fishing' for the grips

Once at the side of the horse, the vaulter should not 'fish' for the grips by extending the arms too early. It should not look as

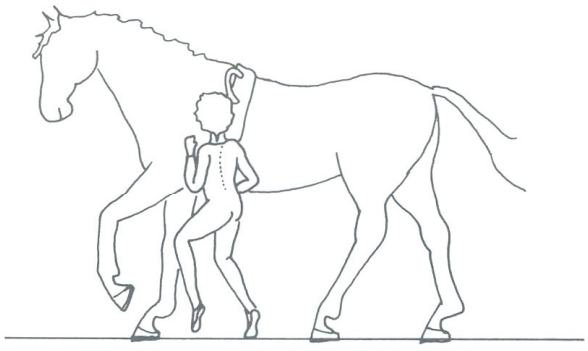


Correct position next to the horse

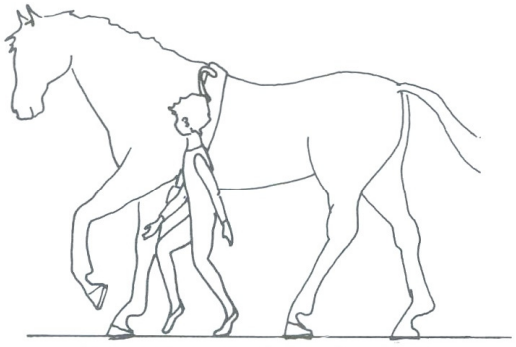
if the arms are pulling the vaulter toward the horse once the hands are on the grips; rather the vaulter should be perfectly balanced within himself until in the right position for the jump-off. The hands touch the grips when the vaulter has reached the horse with his whole body (not leaning with the torso), i.e. runs along with his shoulders parallel to, and his right side nearly touching the horse. In canter, as the horse must be on the correct lead, so does the vaulter. 'Flying changes' should not occur in the vaulter's approach! It manifests confusion about which foot to jump off on, and can become a nasty habit.

Correct position next to the horse

Correct position before jump-off is *next* to the surcingle, *not* a foot behind! Beginners have a great tendency to run either too far *away* (toward the centre of the circle) from the horse, or too far *back* – or both! One reason for this may be the inborn caution to keep their feet away from the hoof in front of them. Point out that *if* they canter along on the correct lead and with the correct rhythm, they will not be in the position to get stepped on, as their feet always stay parallel with the hooves, and out of their way.



Incorrect approach: vaulter aims straight for the surcingle, facing the horse



Incorrect approach: vaulter is on the wrong lead, with stiff posture of arms in the wrong sequence

In the illustrations of the mounting sequence I have tried to show how the wrong position *before* the jump-off *necessarily* leads into a whole series of wrong moves, so that the mount *must* collapse. And will!

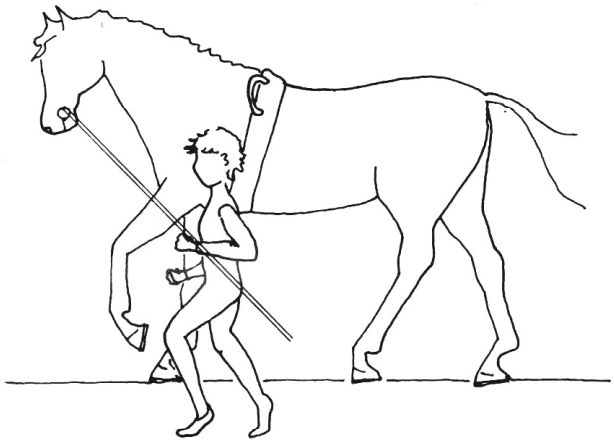
Taking hold of the grips

Once the vaulter has almost reached this position right next to the horse, the arms swing up and the vaulter touches the grips (at this point the judges' stop watches start running, when exercises are timed). There are three 'height adjustments' possible to mount: small vaulters will grab the inside (that is the left) grip with both hands (right hand higher than the left), medium height youngsters might use the leather loop between the grips for their right hand to hold on to, and tall vaulters can reach both grips with both hands respectively (see illustrations in chapter 12 'preparation before vaulting').

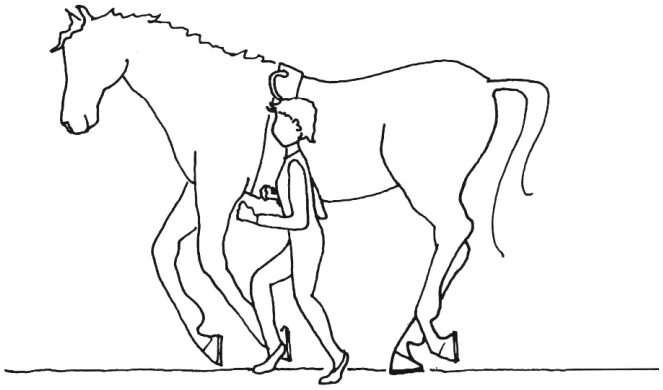
Correct jump-off point

If the vaulter's body is positioned right next to the surcingle, the jump-off point lies almost a *full foot* ahead of the body position. Train them to do this correctly even in walk, where it is hard to feel *why* this is correct, as you do not get the benefit of any momentum. But in canter it is obvious: the horse moves quickly and the vaulter's body needs a certain time to 'fly' up, before coming down in the seat. During this 'flying' time, the horse does not wait for you! If the vaulter jumps off *ahead* of the horse's movement, s/he will reach the highest point *above* the horse at the point in time, when the horse has advanced just the distance which the vaulter had gained by 'getting ahead', so s/he is *again* lined up correctly at the surcingle, which means s/he can then land *right behind* the surcingle and sit in the prescribed spot, without any seat corrections.

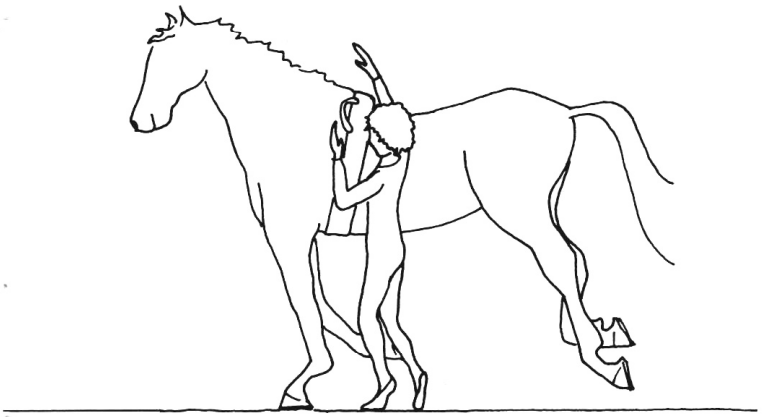
The correct mount



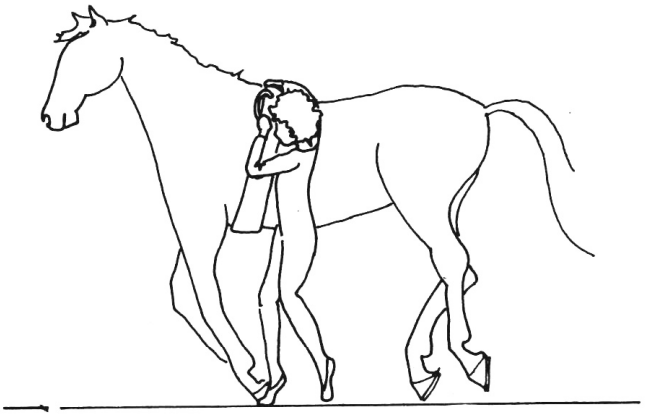
Vaulter approaches along the lunge in the direction of the horse's shoulder, facing the front, running naturally



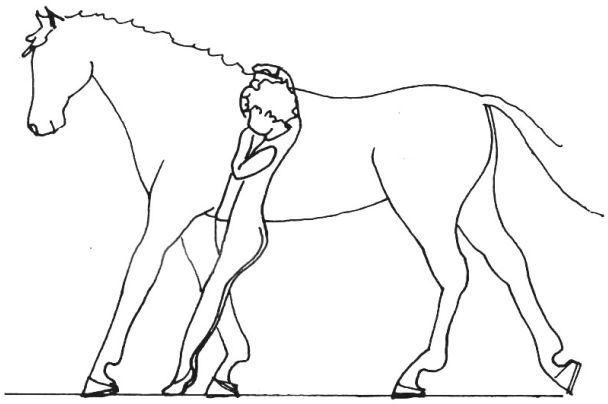
Vaulter falls back very slightly when reaching the horse to arrive at the height of the surcingle



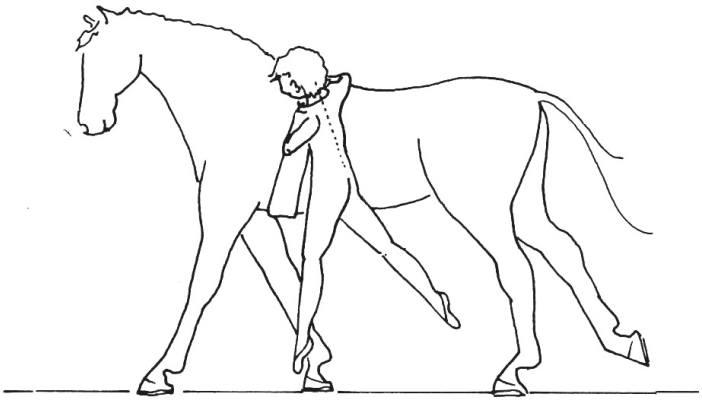
Vaulter reaches for the grips without exaggerated or showy arm movements



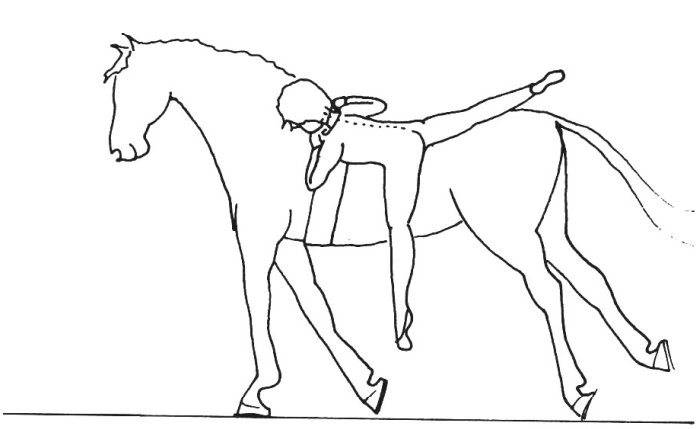
Vaulter finds himself next to the surcingle after taking hold of the grips



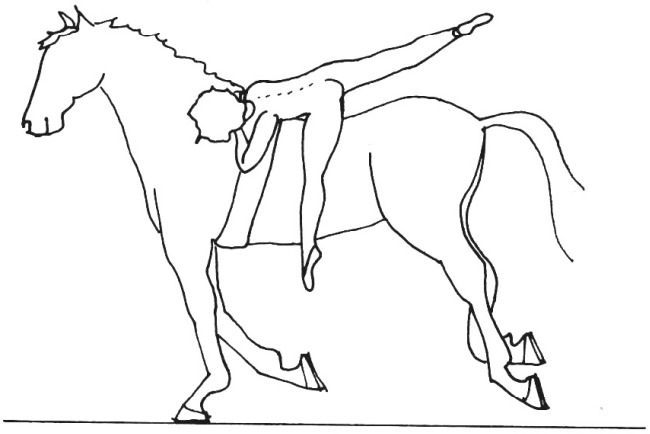
Vaulter jumps off energetically with both feet and in time with the horse, at a point well ahead of the surcingle for best usage of the horse's momentum



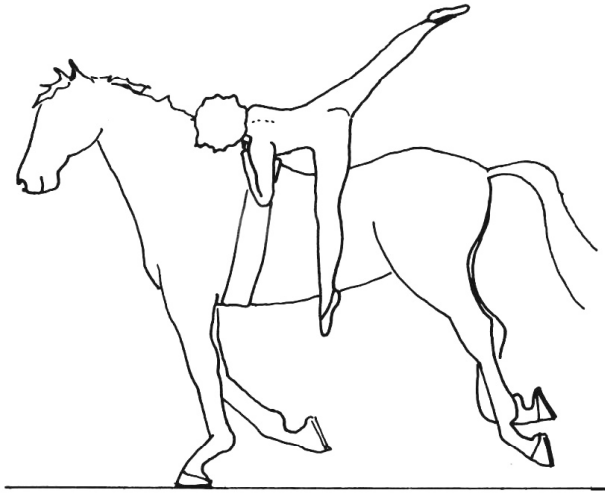
After jump-off, the vaulter immediately spreads his legs, the left leg stays extended to the ground and hips face the front



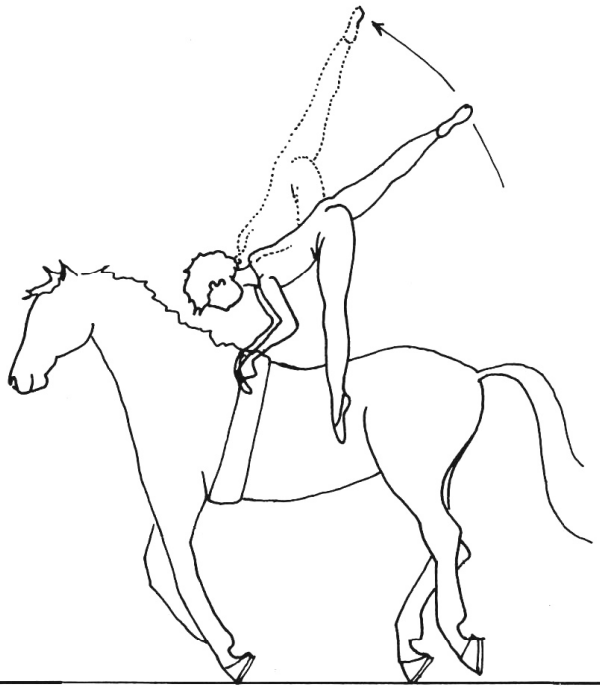
In order for the right leg to achieve maximum height, the head and upper body of the vaulter must stay down



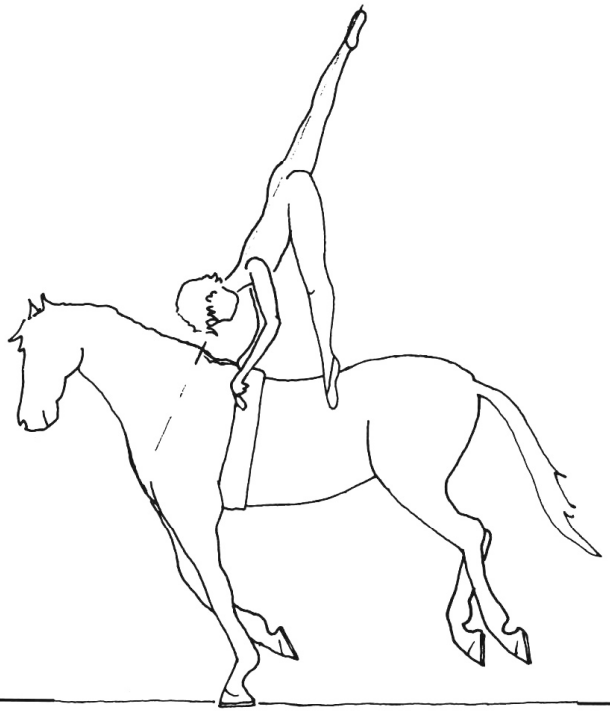
The vaulter starts pushing with the arms



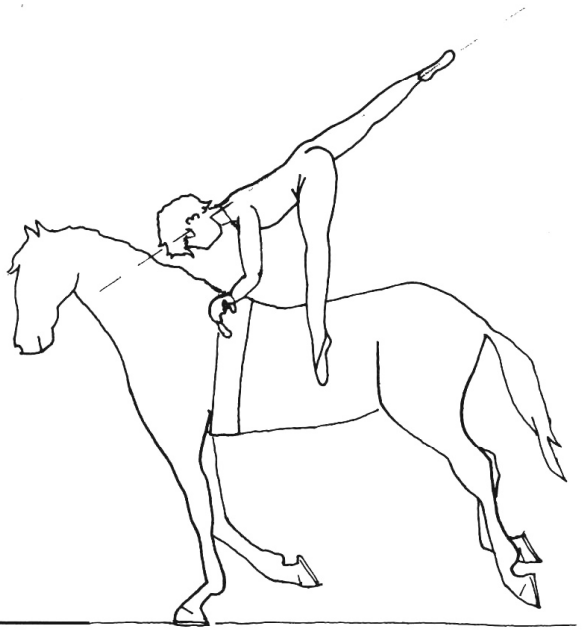
As the horse enters its flight phase of the canter stride, the vaulter reaches his optimum height



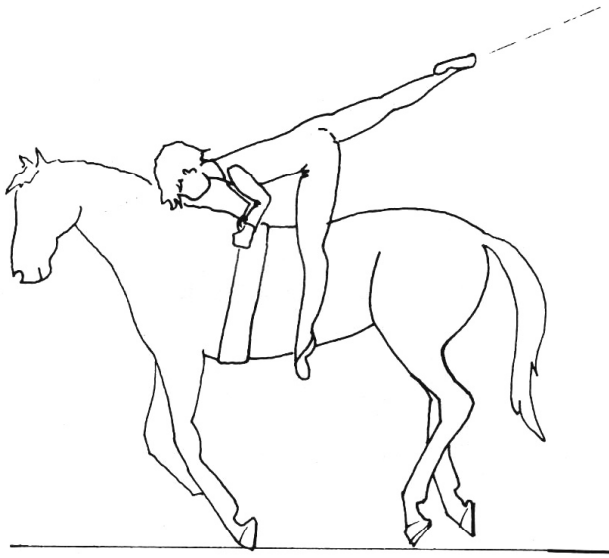
Depending on the flexibility and strength of the vaulter, the mount may reach handstand height, but the left leg stays down and fluid movement may not stop



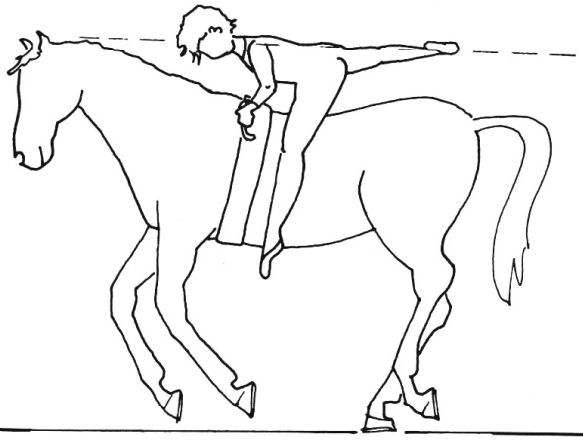
Gravity point must be over the vaulter's hands and straight body line (long spine) maintained...



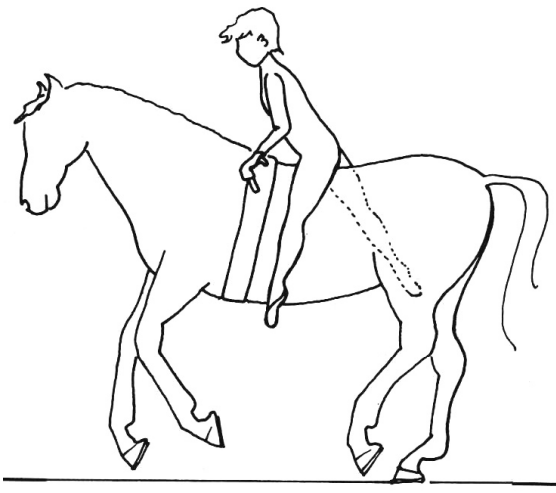
...regardless of the elevation, which the vaulter can reach



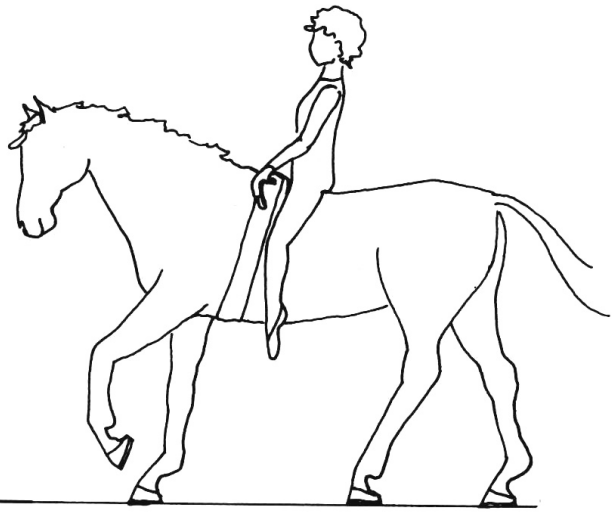
As the vaulter's leg comes down, his upper body comes up. The arms push to assure soft landing, and also direct the vaulter (via pull)...



...into the correct landing spot, directly behind the surcingle

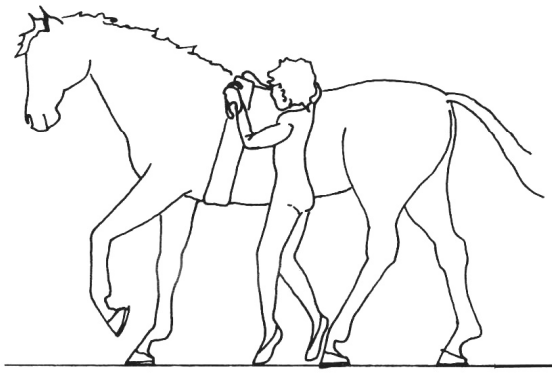


Gravity point of the vaulter must stay over the grips throughout

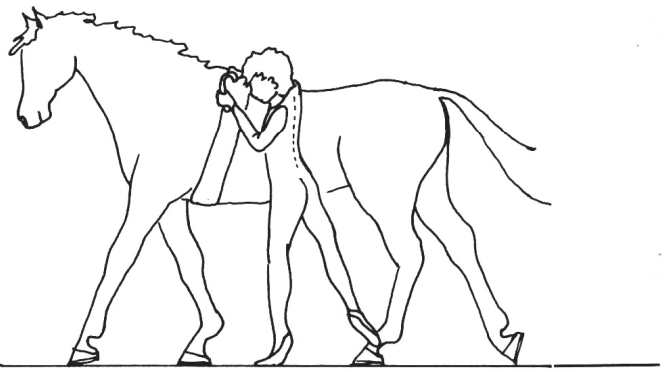


The correct spot for the basic seat

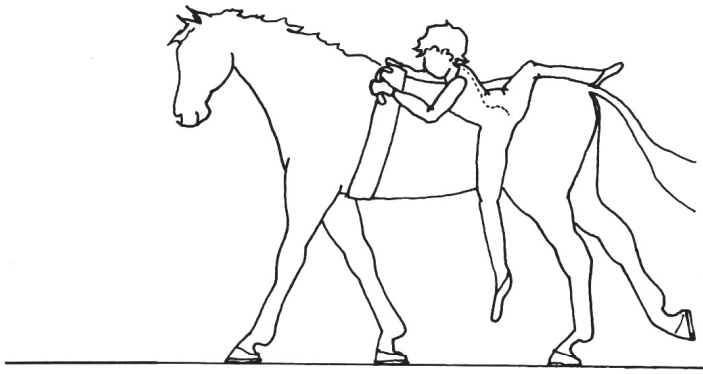
A typical *incorrect* mount



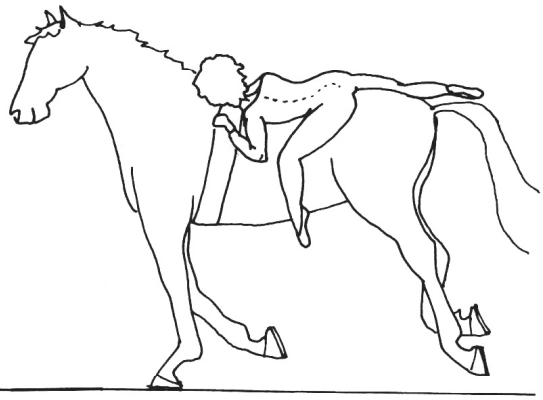
Vaulter approaches too far back, 'behind the horse's movement'. Apart from the possibility of getting kicked, the vaulter has lost his chance of getting his gravity point over...



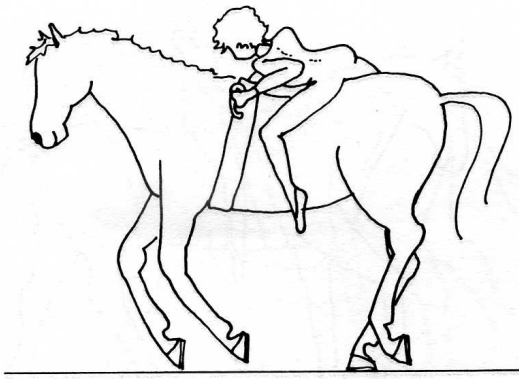
...his hands, as the horse is progressing forward. The vaulter gets dragged along, which makes for a very ineffective jump-off on one foot



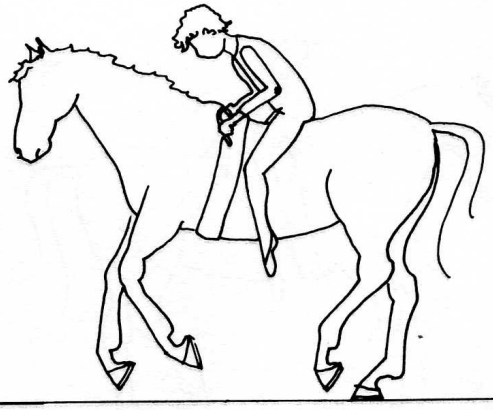
Height can't be achieved like this! The vaulter is clinging and pulling in the attempt to avoid sliding back down. There is no gain from...



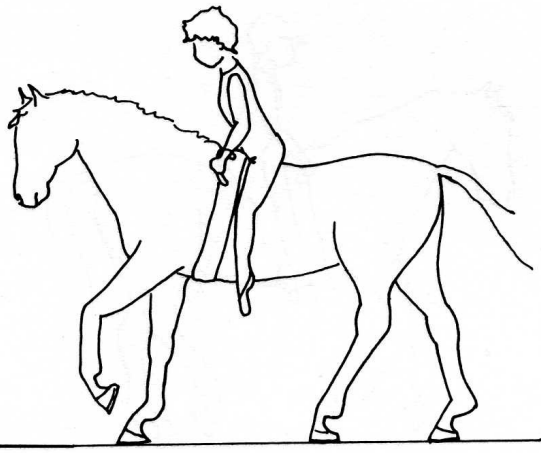
...the horse's momentum. This can last as long as it takes the vaulter to crawl on, so nothing is in time with the horse's canter stride any more



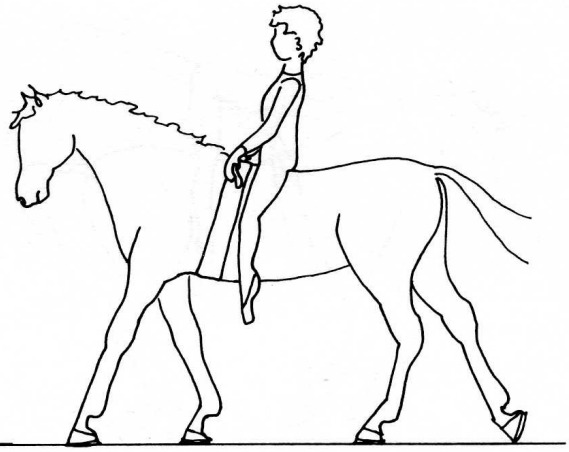
The vaulter 'jack-knifes' the upper body, pulling his head and shoulders to the outside in an effort to catch up with the horse. All fluidity of movement is blocked



The vaulter must pull himself toward the surcingle

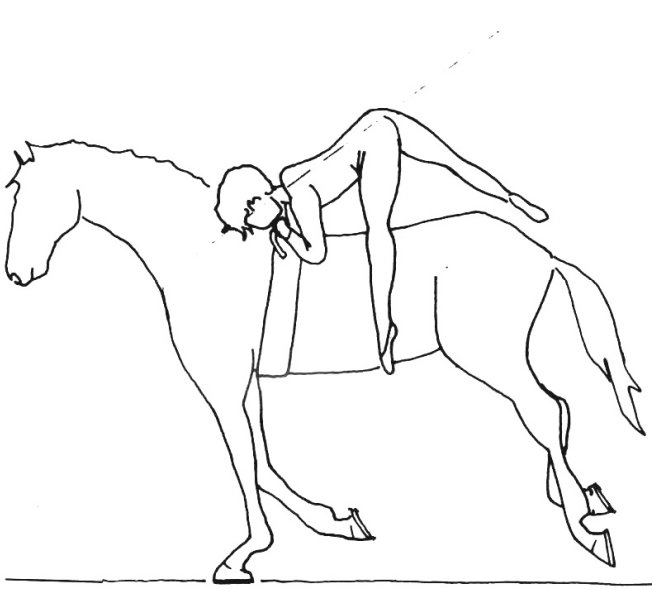


Considerable seat corrections are necessary, before he can...

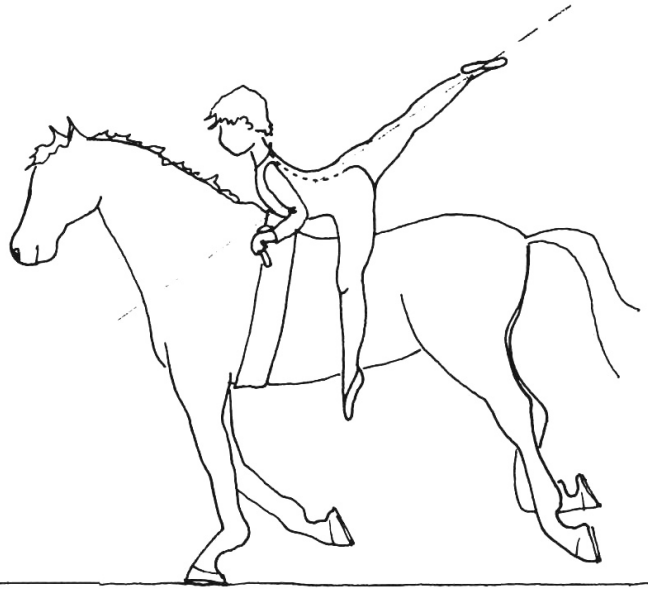


...settle into the correct basic seat position

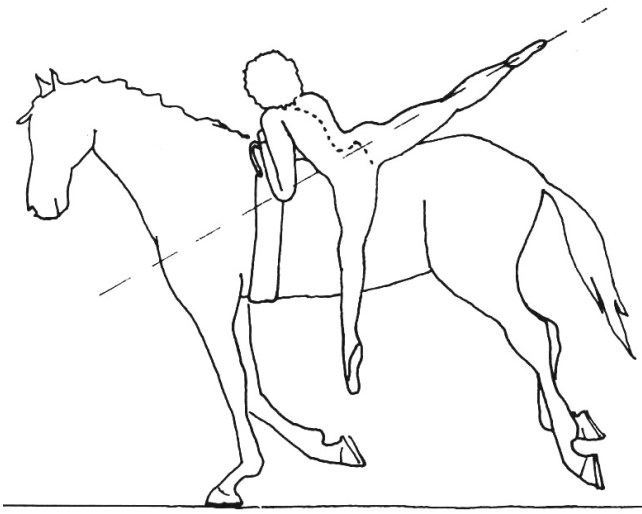
General mount mistakes



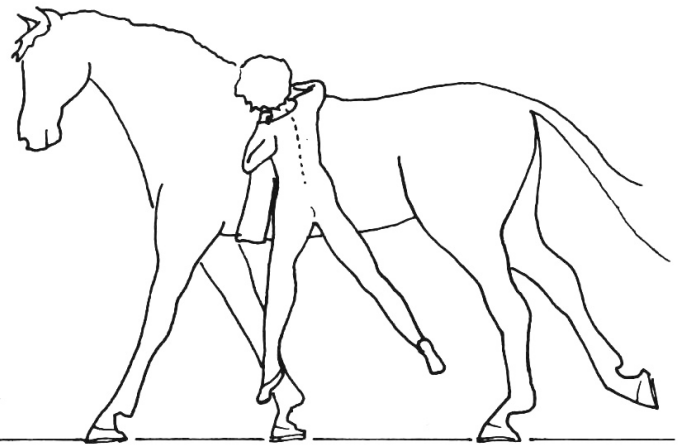
Wrong: although jump-off technique is correct and hips achieve good height, the piked body position barely lets the vaulter clear the croup with the outside foot



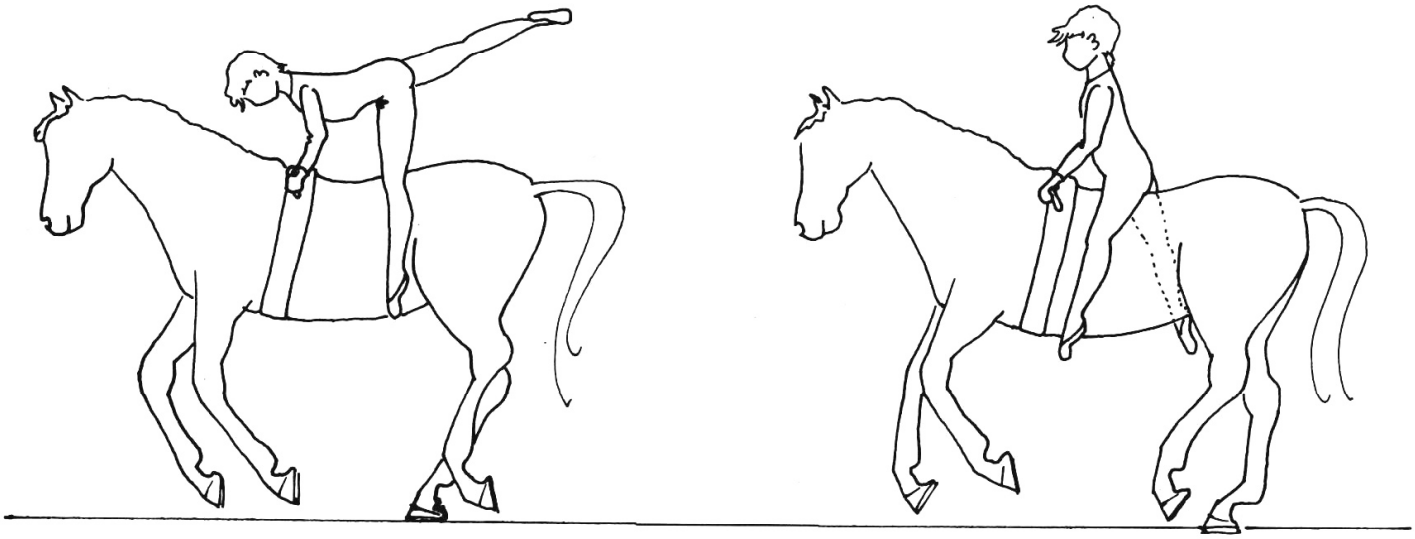
Wrong: vaulter does not leave his shoulders down to achieve straight body line, but achieves height with leg by overarching a very flexible back



Most frequent mount mistake: the vaulter brings head and shoulders up and over first, which results in a twisted body position and 'jack-knifing'. Only extremely flexible vaulters would ever achieve any height with this wrong technique



Wrong: hips, shoulders and head are turning 'into' the horse after jump-off



Wrong: vaulter's gravity point is not over his hands: the arm push will have a backward effect, rather than up, so the arms can't break the body's fall when coming down...

...so he will land hard and too far back

The jump itself

The jump consists of a combination of best use of the momentum from the horse's movement (best technique) and the muscular strength of the vaulter. The easier it looks, the better the marks get! But the jump-off has to be energetic and must use feet, ankles and knees for best push-off. For best momentum to be gained, the vaulter must jump off in the moment just before the horse's inner front leg lifts off. At the moment of the jump off, the vaulter is actually leaning back a little, because his feet are aiming to jump off in front of the surcingle.

Beginners have a tendency to demonstrate the effort they are making by jumping a hole into the ground, rather than putting that energy into a lift-off. 'Jump harder' is no useful comment in those cases, as they *are* jumping as hard as they can (but in the wrong direction: down – instead of up). Many waste a great deal of energy in useless 'pre-jumps', hopping alongside the horse in a succession of jumps without results. In beginners this is natural and expresses their indecision (the next moment might be the better one for jump-off) as well as lack of concentration. With older children you can explain the technique, with little ones *always* make them count: 1–2–3–*hop*, and emphasize that the 1–2–3 are *running* steps. (This counting is *so* important later in assisted mounts and other coordinated team exercises.)

Make them jump in the warm-up in the following manner: let them jump into the air as high as they can without arm swing out of a semi-crouched position. This will teach them to use the take-off power they potentially have in their ankles and the ball of the foot as well as in the knees. Then let them do a series of hops, also just from their feet. Apart from the jump, this is a necessary skill for soft landings after dismounts from high positions.

The lift-off

As the body lifts off, the legs immediately separate and the

vaulter lowers his head over the horse's inside shoulder, while the shoulders of the vaulter stay approximately at the height of the surcingle. The vaulter's seat should fly as high as possible into the air, but the inside leg (left) stays pointing to the ground – knee fully extended and foot and toe pointed. The higher the vaulter swings his right leg, the more height he can gain in the hips. If the head does not go down, the hips will not reach best possible height.

As soon as the right foot swings up, the vaulter transfers his weight to his arms and pushes to achieve best height over the horse's back. The buttocks must definitely reach greater height than the shoulders of the vaulter.

The weaker the jump-off (of the beginner vaulter for example), the more important it is that the arms are used in the most effective way to assist in the mount. If it could be seen in slow motion, the arm action could be described in three phases: in the lowest phase of the lift-off, the right arm does most of the work: pulling. Then the inner arm (left) starts pushing by working over the elbow, while of course the outer arm continues pulling. As the upper body comes up, the inner arm also lifts up and the arm action changes mostly to the wrist, to extend the arm as much as possible as the torso straightens into the seat position. Small vaulters with a good mount rely on this wrist action a lot, as they usually do not perform a hand change to the outer grip, but rather fly into the seat position, straightening the upper body by wrist action of the inner arm only. Small beginners, who still 'cling' to the horse during their mount, will have to perform a hand change from inner grip or middle loop to outer grip to rely on both arms, the pulling *and* the pushing one, more evenly – otherwise they slide down again, before the right leg can 'hook' over the back of the horse.

With very strong arms (older male vaulters mainly) another increase in height can be reached in the mount after the lift-off and maximum extension of right leg, as shown in the drawing. Many such vaulters mount directly over the handstand: as

impressive as this looks, and with all the power this proves, it has no place in the compulsories. The rules state clearly that the 'right leg nearly approach [es] the vertical, as his left leg stretches down towards the ground'. The kick-in of the arm push however is necessary in any case, because as soon as the vaulter has reached his or her highest point in the air, the downward movement starts, and with it, s/he has to get ready for landing...

Let's pretend our vaulter now comes down from airy heights in slow motion: as his right leg swings down on the outside of the horse, and before his seat touches the blanket or back of the horse, the arm action must start to bring the torso up. The torso must be lifted into the vertical position in a *smooth* continuation of the movement of the legs swinging down.

The arm action

The outside (right) arm will pull the vaulter into the correct sitting position behind the surcingle, while the inside arm gives a push to continue moving up the torso (which needs to come up now, as the hips swing down. We are basically striving for a straight body line throughout the exercise). The lifting of the upper body should be a 'smooth continuation of the vault-on, which ends in the seat astride', and that means a lot of arm control. By landing in the seat we mean landing in the *exact and correct position*, that is, the tailbone of the vaulter over the spine of the horse (not right or left of it) and about one hand's width behind the surcingle (not one foot behind!) The legs and feet must also land in the correct position for the basic seat. No weight shifts or seat corrections should be visible after the landing.

The strong arm action is necessary to ensure a *soft* landing on the horse's back. The highest jump is no good, when the vaulter comes down like a ton of bricks. And your horse will start bucking immediately after the first mount, if he has his senses about him – so much for your show or competition! Teach your vaulters to 'work over their inner elbow'. Let them grip the

surcingle as shown in the illustration with their inside (left) hand, thumb *under* the grip from the front and the other fingers over top, on the top part of the inside grip. Like this the elbow lies aligned with the surcingle and can help in the push-off, when the torso has to swing up. Wrist action also helps: when the torso is half way up the inner arm starts pushing out of the wrist, because now the torso is already so high that the elbow does not touch the leather any more. Small vaulters, who grab the inside grip with both hands, rely on wrist action more than on the elbow. Their right hand also does more pushing than pulling, as it still is on the inside grip as well. Small vaulters with a good jump-off do not need to switch the right hand to the outside grip until the mount is actually completed. They do all the necessary pushing action from the inside handle.

Correct timing of the arm action in the mount is hard to teach and most vaulters find it out through repetition and practice rather than through explanations. You also can't pin down the exact moment when the arms have to kick in, as that point changes depending on the height of the jump. However it is clear that the vaulter can't exert arm control, if he does not shift his weight (his gravity point) over his hands. Many new vaulters do not understand that the arms do as much work in a good mount as the legs.

With a normal height jump-off the inner arm will do more pushing to assist the torso in swinging up, and the outer arm will assume (along with the pushing) more of the directional control: some pulling in toward the surcingle to assure correct landing position. But the higher the jump becomes, the more pushing the outer arm does, rather than pulling, because the body has more time (during a higher flight) to align itself with the centre line of the horse's body. World champions do the mount over a complete high vertical with arms fully extended. This position should however not be *held* as such. The motion, no matter how high the mount ends up to be, should not be arrested, but be one flowing and continuous movement from

beginning to end. Remember: there should be no *stops* in a dynamic exercise!

Directly after the landing the vaulter should immediately check himself for correct seat position, before going into the exercise itself. Especially beginners should take a deep breath here (concentration on a good mount usually takes their breath away...), put their legs to the horse, achieving the correct 'wrap', point their toes, and set their mind for what is to come.

Common mistakes

- *In the approach*: vaulter approaches toward the hindquarters of the horse rather than along the lunge. *Danger*: of getting kicked in the approach by spooking the horse through an approach which he can't clearly see. *Danger*: vaulter falls behind the movement and may never catch up with the horse.
- Shoulders are turned toward the horse, rather than parallel with the horse's shoulders and aligned with the direction of travel. *Danger*: in case of a stumble the vaulter will get twisted into a backward position and will fall.
- Vaulter 'fishes' for the grips, and/or leans the torso toward the horse; vaulter does 'flying changes' out of indecision over the jump-off foot; vaulter runs on the wrong lead; vaulter holds arms (or neck) stiff.
- *At surcingle*: vaulter runs too far away from, or too far back from the surcingle; vaulter twists body.
- *Jump-off*: foot position in jump-off too far back, vaulter is 'behind the movement'; vaulter jumps *into* the ground, rather than *away* and up from it; vaulter does useless and wasteful pre-jumps; vaulter separates legs at jump-off, rather than jumping off forcefully on *both* feet and *then* separating the legs; vaulter does not use *all* the joints necessary for good and efficient jump.

- *Flight phase*: vaulter separates legs too late (if right leg does not 'open', it can not fly up and over); vaulter is too far back with legs. *Danger*: ramming his knees or feet into horse's kidneys, causing great disturbance to horse, resulting in bucks.
- Vaulter has no arm power and lies on the horse, no height achieved; vaulter slips back down, because insufficient height is achieved. Here especially beginners, who have the tendency to cling, rather than separating from the horse, when called for, may twist their upper body and end up touching the ground in a backward position. *Danger*: this results in the vaulter being dragged under the horse, in particular when the vaulter only lets go at the very last moment. Never allow your vaulters to cling this way. If a mount fails, they must bring their legs back down quickly and actively jump away from the horse.
- Vaulter keeps head and shoulders up.
- *Landing*: vaulter 'jackknifes', moves head to outside shoulder of the horse in an effort to crawl over to the right side. Most beginners feel that if the head is up, half the battle is won! Explain to them that they are up when their heaviest part is up – which in most cases is the bum, not the brain... By jackknifing, he blocks his own movement by his right arm. A very bad habit, which must be trained *out* of him right away! Hard landing: vaulter slams down on horse, no arm control; vaulter lands too far back and needs strong positional corrections; vaulter's legs are down, but torso does not come up.