

18 *The flag*



The flag is one of the first movements every beginner learns, because it is considered easy, and the one which is most often taught the wrong way. When executed correctly it is quite difficult to hold, as alignment with the horse must be perfect and balance well developed. The flag is a static exercise. When performed outside the block it is followed by a basic dismount. The essence is concerned with posture and balance. There are three support points: the right hand, the left knee and the left foot (except that these two points are not really separate, as the weight should be evenly distributed over the whole shin of the left leg), and these are arranged in a triangle configuration. This gives the exercise good stability when performed as prescribed.

Basic score

The basic score is always given according to the worst mistakes in terms of 'mechanics' in a given exercise. In the flag those mistakes are:

- *A broken arc*: below we will describe what the correct unbroken arc should look like. Very flexible vaulters will show an extreme kink in their vertebral column in the attempt to achieve greater elevation for leg and arm. A flag like this can not be scored higher than a basic mark of 5.0 (from which all other performance faults are then deducted).
- *An extremely rotated hip*: this is the most common attempt to get the leg as high as possible, but not one that pays off! For an extremely 'open' hip, the vaulter will not be scored higher

than again a 5.0 as basic score. Insist on the correct hip alignment from the start, so the vaulters can enjoy the feeling of success as they increase the leg elevation successively with practice — rather than having to put it a foot lower when somebody corrects their open hip after years of performing such a nice (but unfortunately incorrect) flag!

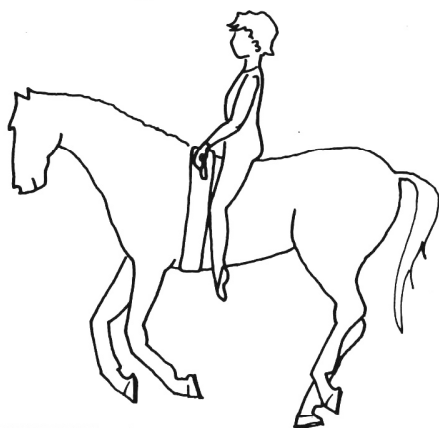
The build-up

As in all exercises the build-up should happen as soon as possible after the mount (or after taking down the arms from the basic seat). From the correct seat position, the vaulter moves himself *into the kneel position* via a slight swing or hop (not dramatic enough to make it look like the start of a dynamic exercise) with *both* legs simultaneously. (Failure to execute the kneel costs a full point.) For this he needs to support his weight with his arms, as consideration must be shown to the horse and the legs must touch the horse's back softly, first landing with the flat top of the feet, then settling down over the shin to the knees. The knees should land immediately in the correct spot for building up the flag. This point is determined according to and depending on the vaulter's size, but lies approximately one to two hands' width behind the surcingle. When the flag is fully and correctly built up, the supporting thigh should be almost at a right angle to the horse's back.

Position of the supporting leg

The left lower leg is then crossed diagonally over the horse's back, with the left foot on the right side of the horse, the knee on the left of the horse's spine, and the weight evenly distributed along the whole flat contact surface. The vaulter must move his gravity point far enough backward, so half of his weight is over this shin. There may be no airspace under the foot, and absolutely no toes dug into the horse's kidneys. In this position, the triangle support configuration is achieved, which, as everyone

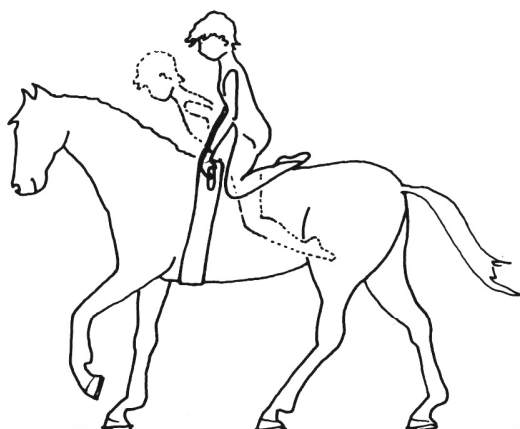
The correct flag



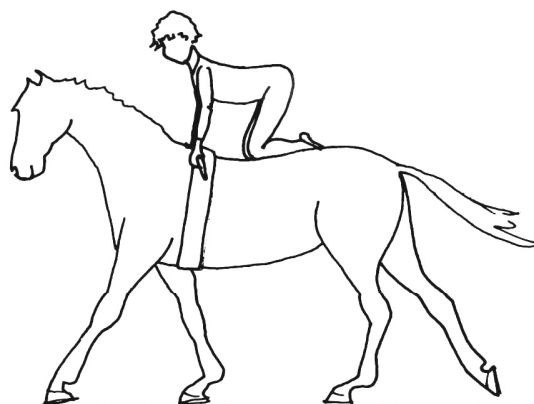
From the correct basic seat...



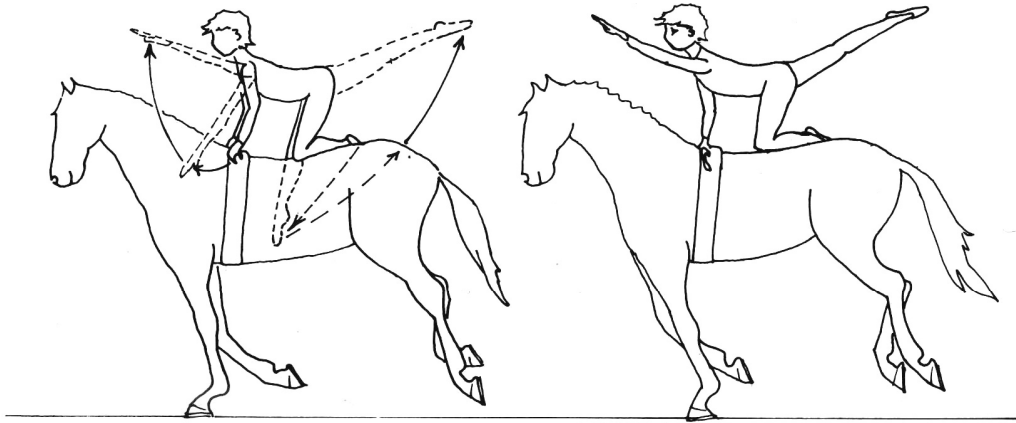
...the vaulter takes a moderate swing to elevate the legs into...



...a kneeling position. Gravity point must be over the hands to settle down softly over the arch of stretched feet. Both legs must kneel in the diagonal position across the horse's back before the flag

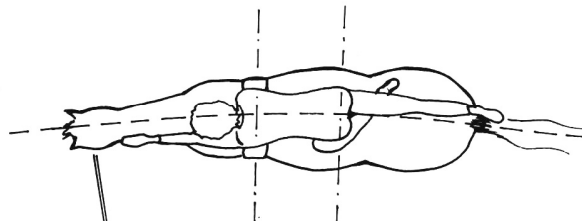


From a balanced bench position, with the thighs approximately at a right angle to the horse's back (shoulders vertically above the grips)

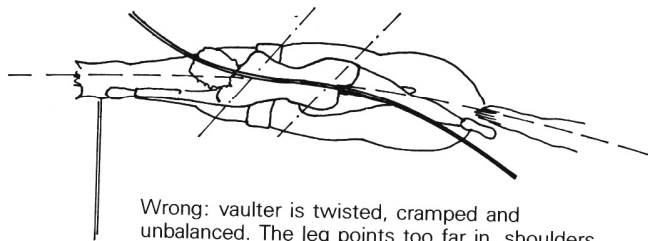


...the vaulter (either extends his outer leg down, which is optional and by some judges not considered proper for competition) stretches his outer leg to the back simultaneously with the extension of the inner arm to the front, both to above a horizontal line over the top of the head

Correct: hand and foot about the same height, soft unbroken arc of the bodyline, hips flat (not rotated) shoulders parallel to and vertical above the grips. The vaulter looks over the back of the extended hand



Correct alignment seen from the top: hips and shoulders are parallel, and square to the horse's spine. The extended arm and leg are parallel to the horse's as well as the vaulter's spine. The supporting leg lies diagonally over the horse's back



Wrong: vaulter is twisted, cramped and unbalanced. The leg points too far in, shoulders and hips are not aligned with the surcingle, head is turned out

remembers from geometry lessons, is the most stable configuration that exists.

Bringing up the right leg

When this 'bench' position (kneeling on both knees and supported by both arms) is assumed, there are different ways to lift the right leg into the flag position. Only the second one is presently considered correct in competition, and the scores get higher with added elegance, fluidity and difficulty of execution. I will group them from easier to more complex.

- Beginners should slide their right leg directly from the kneel into the extended position, then establish their balance over a strong right arm, and only when they are sure that the balance can be maintained should they extend the left arm into the fully built up position. They get penalized less like this, remember: in competition, for leaning onto the horse's neck with the hand (without loss of form) the vaulter loses a full point, and for retaking the grip (because of loss of balance) s/he loses two full points! Retaking the grips twice causes a compulsory exercise to be scored as zero – so repeated loss of balance is never worth the risk. No vaulter can afford that. . . so train them accordingly. Undue delay to get into the exercise is penalized, but the beginner especially should always take the time and concentration s/he needs to get fullest satisfaction out of his/her own best possible form.
- The better way is to extend the leg in the same fashion, but simultaneously with the left arm. This increases of course the level of difficulty, as the risk of losing the balance is higher this way. Although elegance in vaulting is subject to different trends over time, this seems to be the way for compulsories, which judges want to see at this time in competition. Arm and leg should reach their end position at the same time and in the most direct way possible – no fancy moves in between!

- The third option is to extend the right leg *down*, fully stretched and pointed, before swinging it up in a controlled motion; at the same time the arm swings up, also fully extended. Hand and foot again reach their respective highest points simultaneously. This looks quite elegant and is acceptable within the international rules at the time of writing this book, but harbours the danger that the vaulter omits the full kneel before swinging the leg into the flag position. This omission will cost the vaulter a full point in competition.

Correct arm, shoulder and head position

The extended arm should be lifted to about the same height as the leg (the right foot should be *slightly* higher than the left hand); ideally to above the horizontal line running over the vaulter's head. Fingers should be together and palm down with the thumb against the hand. The shoulder of the extended arm should *not* stretch forward, rather both shoulders must stay square with the shoulders of the horse. The head should be erect, face and eye forward, looking over the back of the extended arm, but without resulting in a kinked neck.

The vaulter's top line should describe an even, smooth, unbroken arc from fingertips to toes along the hand, arm, back, leg and foot. With correct alignment (see next point) it is not easy to reach a higher leg extension than the above mentioned horizontal line. But very flexible vaulters achieve it: take care that the head (the eye should look over the extended arm, which is almost as high as the leg) is not lifted to the extreme that proper breathing stops during the exercise.

Alignment

So far it sounds easy, but here comes the tricky part. The flag needs to be aligned in two ways for correct performance:

- lengthwise: with the spine of the horse, and
- parallel to the horse's back (or the ground)

- Lengthwise, or seen from the top, the spine of the vaulter must follow the exact line as the spine of the horse. All twisting action in the vaulter's body is easily detected and should always be corrected. (Push the little ones into the correct form, rather than explaining, so they understand the *feeling* of it.)
- Parallel to the ground is much harder...when the flag seems easy to a vaulter, this is where he is doing it wrongly. Explain to your young vaulters that you must be able to rest a full glass of water on their tailbone – to keep them from 'opening' their right hip. The back of the pelvic bones *must* be flat, both buttocks at the same height. The sole of the right foot will then point to the sky, the knee straight down, not sideways as in dancing. Otherwise the flag is technically not correct. As soon as you correct their opening hips, all legs sink...the balance is lost, the right arm collapses...the body starts to twist... The extended leg must be lifted from the muscles in the vaulter's back, and holding the balance like this actually requires a lot of strength, apart from flexibility.

Stillness of the exercise

Unfortunately this flag is one which is not allowed to flutter in the wind; the name is not logical...

Once the extended arm and leg position are established, the flag must be held as still (not stiffly) as possible for four full canter strides (start counting after it is *fully* built up) because it is a static exercise. The supporting knee, very slightly bent (with the seat of the vaulter as high off the horse as possible) and the supporting elbow are both 'greased' and ideally move just enough to absorb the motion of the horse.

Although the flag should be held calmly, it may never look stiff. It is better if the leg waves a little, because the vaulter swings with the motion of the horse, than if the vaulter holds

himself completely stiff in his attempt to keep still, cramping up and working against the canter stride. Watch especially that the left shoulder and the neck stay relaxed. And remind your beginners that the cure against losing your balance is not hanging on harder, but shifting the gravity point back where it belongs: over the spine of the horse (and ever so slightly to the inside of that point to make up for the centrifugal force).

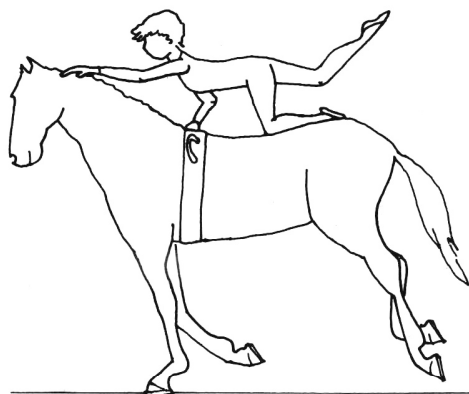
Take-down

After holding the flag for four strides, the extended leg is taken down, fully stretched, at the outside of the horse, at the same time as the left arm returns on a direct arc to the grip. With equal arm support on both sides, the vaulter executes a little lift-off from the supporting leg, which is then also fully stretched, as s/he slides in one fluid motion into a soft landing on the horse's back, immediately into the right spot for correct seat position, without any necessity for seat corrections. If no other exercise follows, the correct way off is the basic dismount.

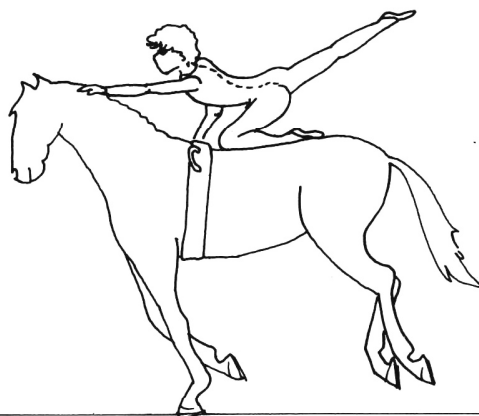
Common mistakes

The length of the list shows the difficulty!

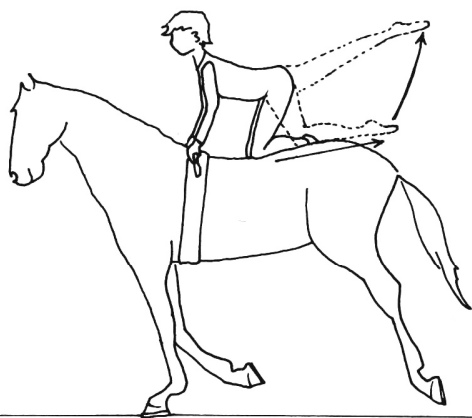
- exaggerated hop or swing into kneeling position
- build-up, forgetting to go over the kneel (one full point deduction)
- sitting on haunches: collapse to the back
- supporting knee too far back, combined with weak arm: collapse to the front
- supporting knee too far to front: flag can't be properly extended upward, stays low
- supporting leg not positioned diagonally over horse's back
- toes of supporting leg dug into horse's back, airspace visible (this means too much weight on the knee, not enough along the shin, and/or clinging with the left foot)

Common flag mistakes

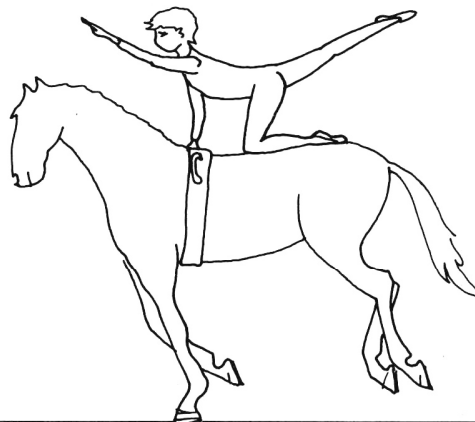
Wrong: the supporting leg is too far back. Bad posture generally, lacking body tension



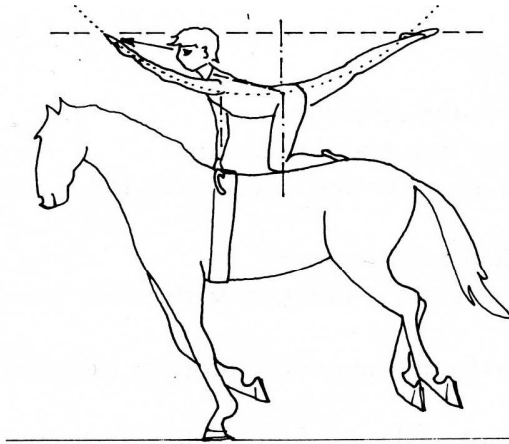
Wrong: right hip is 'open', i.e. the hip rotates to facilitate gaining height for the outer leg. The supporting leg is too far to the front. No alignment, inner shoulder is dropped, arm is too low because balance is lost



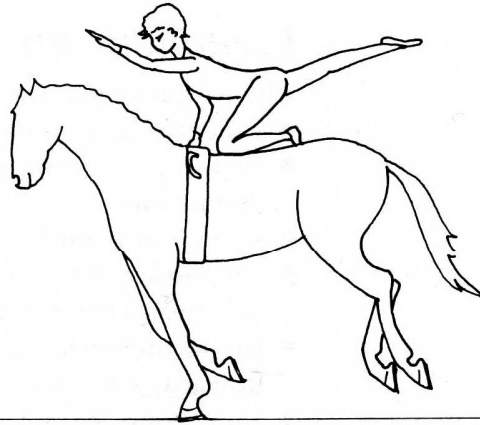
Correct way for beginners to extend the leg: extend leg before the arm. Establish balance securely before lifting the arm into position



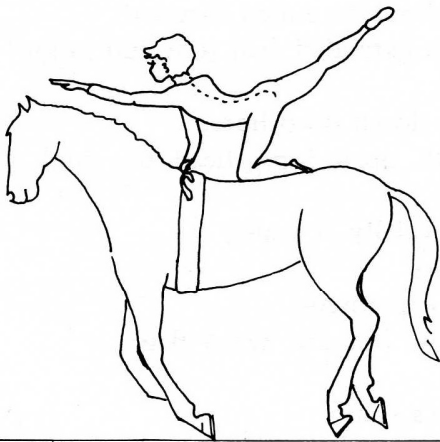
Can you see the mistake? The supporting leg is not diagonal across the horse



Correct alignment



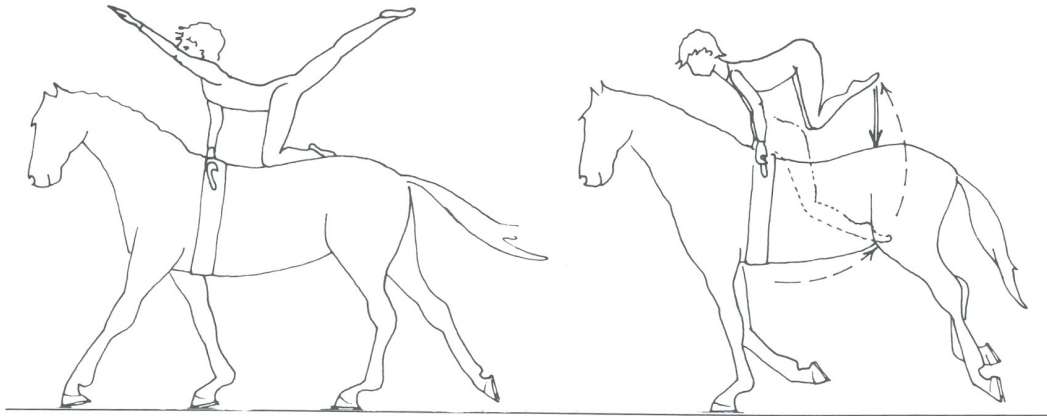
Wrong: supporting leg is too far to the front. The weight is not distributed evenly over the entire shin, as can be seen by the air under the foot. The arm is not stretched, head is too low



Wrong: twisted alignment: left shoulder is drawn to the front, right hip is 'open'. Leg and arm height are very uneven



Wrong: overarched back! Hip is 'open', supporting leg is too far back. Arm and chin are too high



Wrong: left shoulder too high and cramped

Wrong: excessive swing to get into the flag.
This may *not* look a dynamic exercise!

- twisted shoulders
- open hip, turned out right leg (knee facing out) (this is the most common evasion of difficulty!)
- arm too low (often with left shoulder pulled forward)
- touching the horse's neck with extended arm (one full point deduction)
- head too low, and/or looking down onto horse
- overarched back (usually with open hip), head too high, restricted breathing
- broken arc of the top line (especially at waist)
- low right leg, missing flexibility
- bent knee in right leg, toes not pointed
- stiff supporting knee and elbow, bouncy, wavy flag
- stiff and/or twisted shoulders
- missing alignment along horse's spine