

24 *Training for first freestyle exercises*

When you are first starting out with children who have never vaulted, you will train the compulsories for quite a while to teach them the basics, then, to introduce more variety, you will start them on some individual freestyle exercises. These don't have to be discussed in this book at any length, as the progression from simple to complex is logical and you can choose the appropriate exercises from the catalogue at the end of this book.

The basic difference between the compulsories and the individual ('single') freestyle exercises lies in the open choice of:

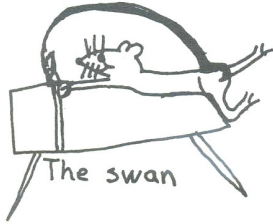


- *Security and number of holding points:* A simple example of how a beginner will progress is to move from a free kneel (large support surface: both shins; basically four support points: feet and knees; symmetrical exercise) to a 'Prince's seat' (smaller support surface: one shin and only the foot of the other leg; basically three support points; asymmetrical exercise). An example for the progression to difficult would be to move from a forward arabesque in the stirrup (three secure support points: two grips plus one stirrup; plus leg support leaning against the horse; low elevation) to a free arabesque on the horse's back (one very small support point, that is, one foot. Greater height, that is, more impact of motion; requires excellent balance).



- *Possible changes in direction:* In freestyle we introduce a great variety of directional changes, forward, backwards, sideways, upside down, inside and outside the circle, and combinations of these (like a SW shoulderhang). Difficulty varies with direction: a BW stand is of course more difficult than a FW

one, which, as a compulsory exercise, does *not* qualify for a kur!



- *We also start using different parts of the horse's body:* And the impact of motion, and width of support surfaces varies greatly with that. Standing on the croup for example heightens the difficulty in three ways: it is harder to get there – it is more slippery (no pad) – and the movement is more pronounced. Standing in front of the surcingle on the horse's shoulders is even more difficult as the surface to stand on is very narrow and slants steeply. Also motion is more pronounced than in the middle of the horse's back.
- *The last significant difference lies in the possibility of making movements more complex:* In freestyle the vaulter can include (in exercises, mounts, dismounts and transitions) such motion as twists, rolls, jumps and complex swings. Here he needs not only good body control and strength for precision, excellent timing to stay in sync with the horse's canter stride, but also good spatial orientation. Get your vaulters used to this concept early. You'll find that many children (especially when they still confuse left and right) are quite lost when they hang upside down! They need to learn some sense of spatial orientation first, before they attempt rolls and twists. When a vaulter later performs a sideways roll-off dismount in canter (from lying on his back) he will roll *and* twist in the air to land in the forward direction to be able to continue running in the direction of travel as required.

The vaulter should progress logically from easy to difficult, from simple to complex. He should be acquainted with some directional changes and some transitions, as well as freeing one or two hands to support a partner, before attempting 'double' or team exercises.

Your vaulters must always train new exercises first on the floor (where applicable, like handstands) and then on the barrel.

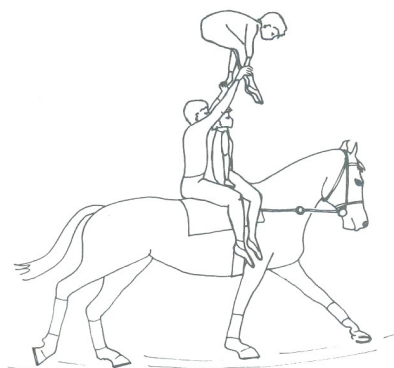
Later you will try them in walk on the horse – walk along and spot the children, where necessary. For each freestyle exercise they do they must be aware of and practise the correct procedures to get out of it in case of a mishap (round-offs from handstand, roll-offs, jump-offs from kneel and stand, etc.). When they start these exercises in canter later, always practise the easier form first (that is, without letting the hands go, or holding with one hand), even if the exercise already looks perfect in walk.

I like to start young vaulters on double exercises early, as soon as they are reasonably secure, because it is really what they want most, and offers new aspects of vaulting. For some this point in time may be after the sixth lesson, for others much later. It depends on their age, their state of mind, their balance and their experience in related disciplines, such as gymnastics.

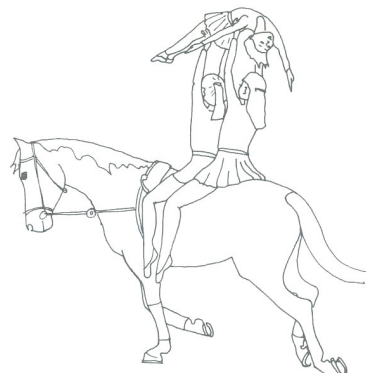
New criteria for the introduction of team exercises

When you start out your children on team exercises, several new criteria come into play, which you did not have to deal with while practising compulsories or other single exercises. Namely:

- *Trust in the partner* becomes essential: this will of course grow over time, but it can only grow in a positive and effective way, if things do not go wrong – so take great care to start out with simple exercises, first on the barrel, then in walk. Assess the abilities of your vaulters correctly, try out their strength slowly – and emphasize the fun of team exercises! An experience of success is essential in the first team exercises, as it is hard to rebuild trust in a flyer, who once got dumped head first into the sand from a height of six feet!
- *Cooperation between partners* becomes necessary. Refer also to chapter 5 for the difficulty which might occur between vaulting children. Take likes and dislikes between the children into account – it is always more fun to cooperate with a friend

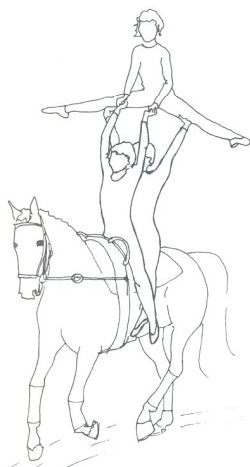


'Double jump'

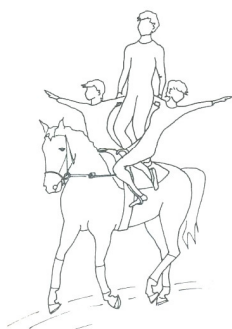


'Draped lift'

You *are* in someone else's hands!



'Lifted FW split'



Variation of 'the star'

first; more professional feelings of cooperation will be developed later. Explain that cooperation means discussing things; if they don't work – never let the children abuse each other or lay blame! If you do not stop such practices (and sometimes the parents get into the picture too!) right from the start, you will not be able to build an efficient and consistent team.

- *Coordination between partners:* each grip should be repeated until it has become second nature. The sequence of grips you demand should be logical, as simple as possible – and always the same for each exercise! This greatly adds to the safety of any exercise, it establishes training routine and it saves enormous time in mounts, transitions and the build-up and take-down of exercises – phases, which should be executed accurately and quickly to leave more time to show off the exercise itself. (In competition you will have to deal with time restraints!)
- *Timing of moves,* coordinated between partners. It is best to establish clear rules for the whole team of how to count: for mounts behind a partner for example we count 'one, two, three, hop', as this gives a beginner enough time to prepare for the jump off, and more proficient vaulters count 'three,

hop'. We use the same principle for all exercises. It saves a great deal of confusion. Don't allow one vaulter to jump on hop, the other on three etc.; your team will take twice as long to get coordinated!

There are certain basic principles in team kur exercises, which must be followed to guarantee safe and successful performance.

Basic principles for team kur exercises

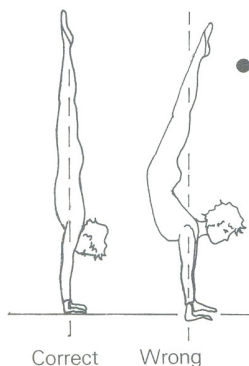
Basic techniques of static team kur exercises: Since we can't analyse all static team kur exercises, we'll just explain the most essential techniques, which apply to most of them. Basically, we are always striving for a straight, strong body line. This applies to handstands, bench positions, wheelbarrows as well as lying positions of a flyer.

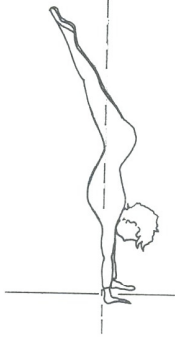
(A) Exercises with handstands, wheelbarrows and arabesques

To all of the above the same principles apply. In the correct handstand the vertical line through the vaulter's gravity point will run exactly through the support surface of the hands. Eyes should be directed onto the hands and the back should be long and straight, as if pulled upward.

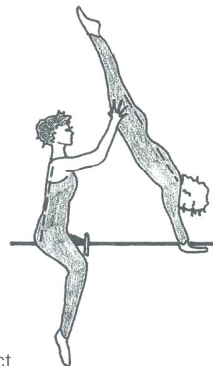
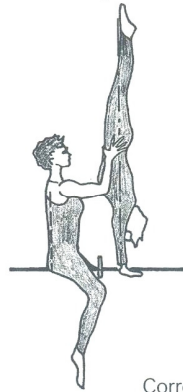
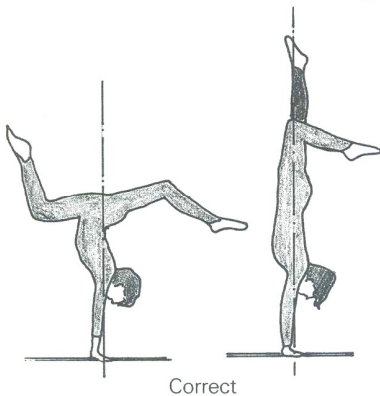
The most common handstand mistakes are:

- (1) *Overbent hollow back*: results most often from lack of strength in the back musculature, or lack of ability to tense those muscles adequately. Often the very flexible children find it 'cool' to show off how they can bend their backs, totally unaware of how wrong that posture is. This may also result from fear of losing orientation, so the vaulter tries to look into the forward direction, thereby overextending his neck. Loss of balance, through strong deviation from the vertical line, is then made up by overcurving the back.



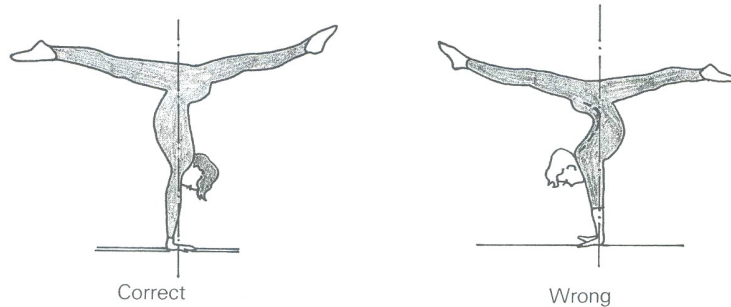


- *Correction:* looking onto the hands; pulling stomach in (the shorter the stomach muscles are contracted, the straighter the back will be); imagine someone pulls your toes to the roof. If the hollow back is a result of lacking body tension, try to correct with the following exercise: the vaulter in handstand will be tilted back and forth between two partners, while tensing his stomach and back musculature.
- (2) *Combination of hollow back and bent arms:* could result from deficient arm strength, sometimes combined with stiff shoulders frequently stems from trying to make up for loss of balance by 'walking'.
- *Correction:* tense stomach muscles against hollow back; push-ups for arm strength; exercises to increase shoulder mobility practise handstands against the wall.
- (3) *S-shaped handstand:* often results from fear of flipping over or lack of spatial orientation: not feeling where the legs are in relation to the vertical. Since the legs do not reach the vertical, the vaulter has to shift his butt the other way (opposite the feet) to move his gravity point back onto the vertical line.
- *Correction:* stretching in the hip, practising handstand against the wall, practising handstand to complete vertical, and then rounding off sideways.



The basic position, the technically correct one, might change a little, as the aesthetic aspect is introduced into it. Some leg positions require that the back is hollowed slightly more than shown before, but an overbending of the back should always be avoided.

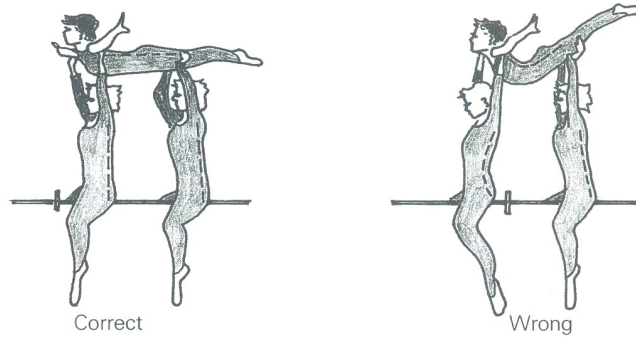
The same principles apply to all supported handstands, whether executed on the horse or on the partners, as well as for all wheelbarrow and lying flyer positions.



(B) Technique of the carrying underman

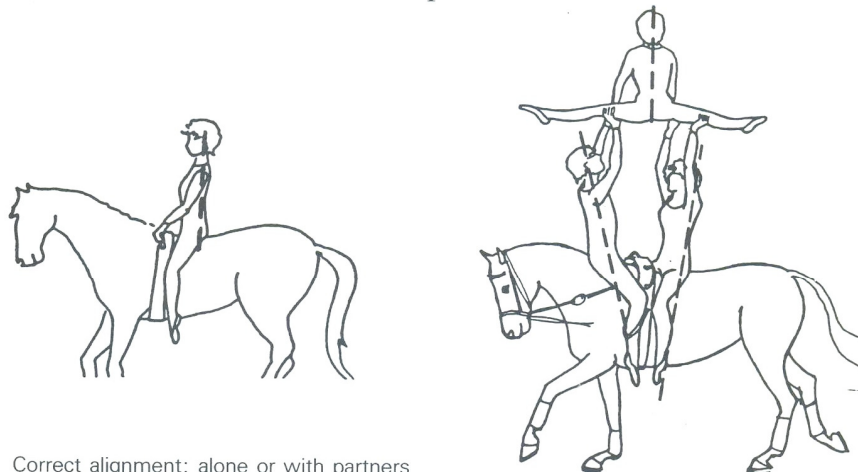
There are many books which depict and explain in anatomical terms how the positions of the bones (shoulders, spine and pelvis) should look in a healthy body, and how to relieve the strain on the spine by using stomach and back musculature correctly. The way our spine is built it is obvious that the less we curve it, the less strain we put on the discs. As a trainer you should have the basic knowledge to be able to teach correct posture and determine whether a vaulter has sufficiently developed back and stomach muscles to be used as a carrying underman.

As participation (at least in competition) in team exercises is limited agewise to eighteen years and under, most carrying undermen are still growing, and it is extremely important to insist on correct technique to avoid damaging their backs. They often have to lift flyers not much younger and lighter than themselves and on top of that they have to absorb the motion of the horse in canter, so the load and strain can be quite significant.

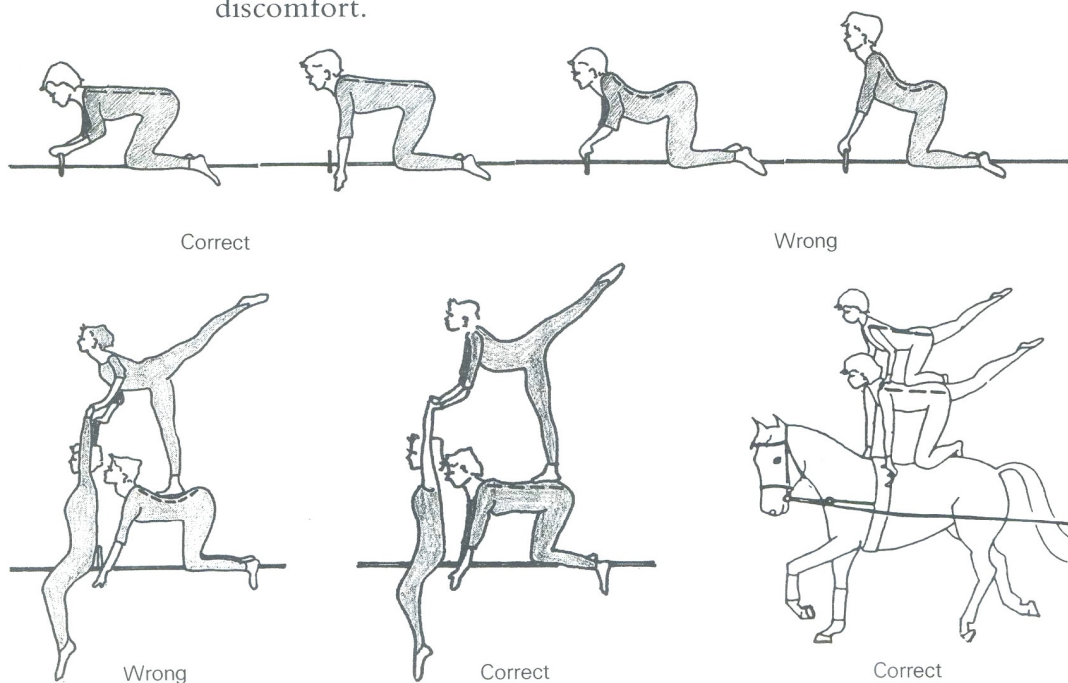


The posture of a strong straight spine, where the weight of the lifted flyer is carried by the muscles (and not by bone and disc compression!), is necessary in all lifting exercises, whether executed in sitting, kneeling or standing position.

When the underman is sitting, all the principles of the basic seat (as discussed previously and in the chapter about compulsory exercises) apply. The underman can only do his best in supporting someone else, if he is perfectly balanced himself and maximizes his strength by assuming the technically correct posture. This means: weight balanced on both buttocks evenly, no slouch, no hollow back, no pelvic tilt out of the prescribed position, no bend in the torso, no drawn-up knees.



When the underman is kneeling, the rules are the same in an upright kneel. In a bench position, take care that the angle of the upper leg to the horse's back is less than 90 degrees, so the weight is evenly distributed on the entire surface of the lower leg of the underman. Otherwise, with the added weight, he might press his knees into the back of the horse and cause him great discomfort.



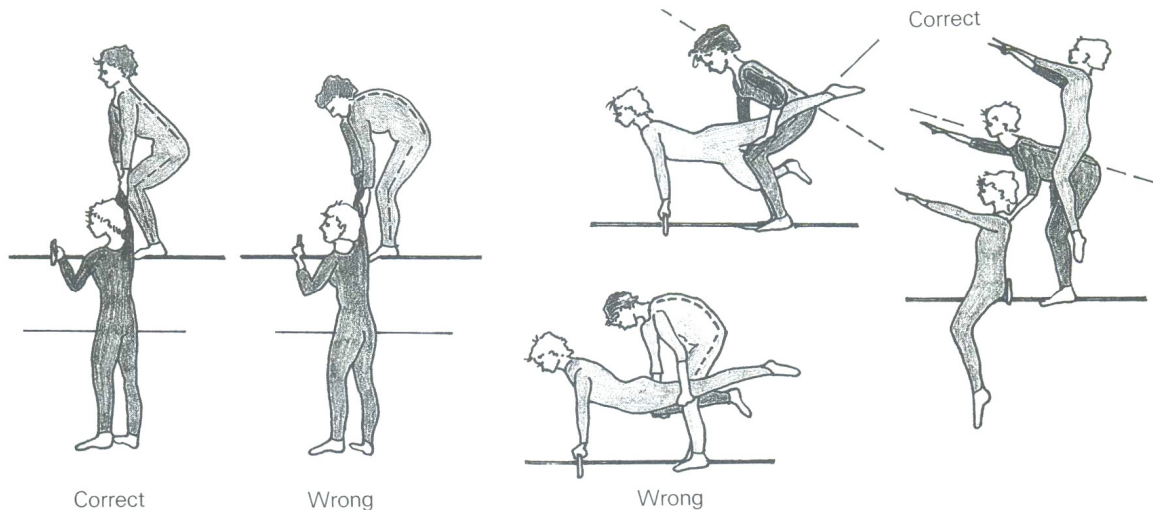
There must be no rounded back — the top vaulter would slide off! If a vaulter rounds his back in these exercises, it may be a sign that the weight is too much for him and he is instinctively trying to evade possible pain. Do not let someone stand in the middle of his back then! He may be able to support the weight well if the top man stands further back, toward his hip bones.

Correct a hollow back, as this position is the worst for carrying a load. The vertebrae are forced together, if the underman lets his back sink, and damage of bones and discs may occur.

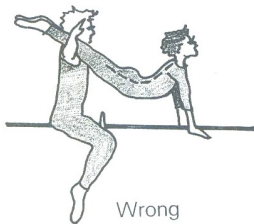
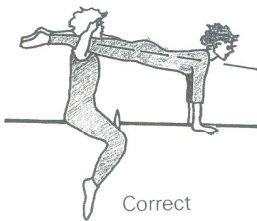
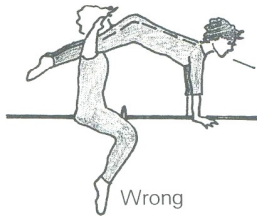
Correct forced shoulder positions either way: shoulders should neither be squeezed together at the back (this means stiff arms, trying to get the weight off the elbows) nor rounded to the front (usually in conjunction with a rounded back).

And get the stiffness out of their elbows! Remember that it is always the joints closest to the horse, which must stay most 'greased' to absorb the motion of the horse, i.e. here the knees and elbows! This is particularly important, when supporting someone else at greater height as the motion is felt more strongly, the higher the position gets. Stiff elbows may suggest lack in arm strength to support the added weight – more push-up training and give the vaulter time to build up the needed strength. An underman will often hollow his back in an attempt to offer a better standing surface to the vaulter on top, and this is also frequently a sign that the arms are not strong enough for the added load yet.

When the underman is standing, a lack of balance would be even more drastically felt! Therefore, whether supporting a mount, carrying an 'angel' or holding a wheelbarrow, the same principles apply. No rounded back, straight spine with erect head, and soft knees to absorb the motion.

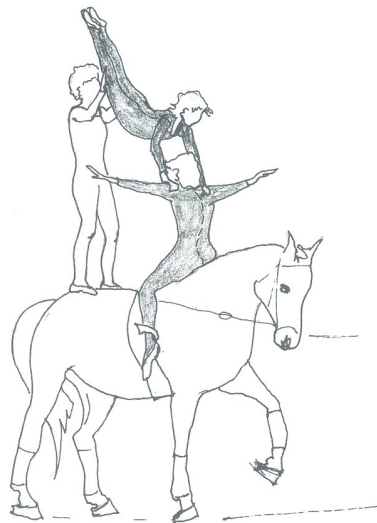


(C) Technique of the carried 'flyer'

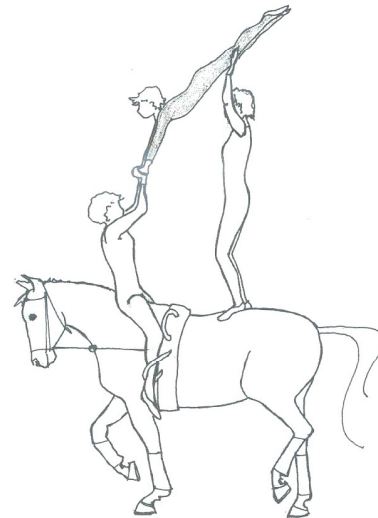


It is important to explain to your flyers that being lifted by your undermen does not mean 'hanging' there like a limp rag! A potential flyer must learn to carry himself, and to have optimal body tension in his back, arm and leg muscles. The flyer has to see himself as executing the exercise himself, only that he is being lifted as he does so. He also has to take care that his own gravity point is close to the support points, and he must balance himself. A flyer who hangs limply and wiggles will indeed feel like a sack of potatoes: he weighs twice as much as the same person holding himself! As the vaulters' performance improves, the flyer will often jump directly into a lifted position, which presupposes even more, that he 'creates' his position by using his muscles actively, rather than just being carried.

Very flexible flyers again have the tendency to over-arch their backs — many people see this as beautiful. For artistic expression a back may be somewhat arched, as long as all the muscles are tensed sufficiently so that the flyer holds his position by himself.

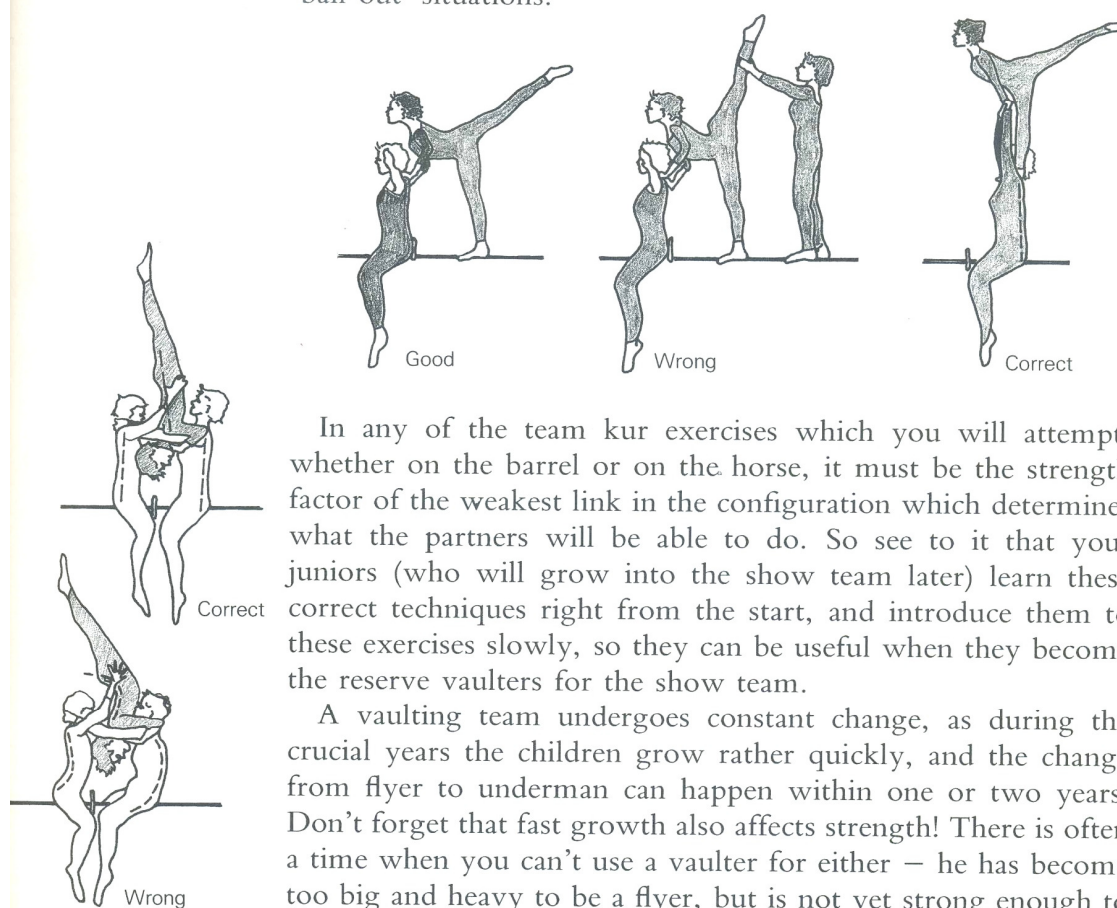


Wrong



Correct

Another fault is forced over-extension of a fellow vaulter, which often is seen in flyer positions. The extended leg of the flyer must be held by his own strength rather than being pushed into a further extended position, out of which it would sink immediately, if the partner stopped pushing. Forced body positions can damage the muscles of the growing child, especially when jolted through the canter stride. Also think of the added danger in case of a fall: a 'hanging' flyer can not roll off actively or jump out of a lifted position. See chapter 23 for reference to 'bail-out' situations.



In any of the team kur exercises which you will attempt, whether on the barrel or on the horse, it must be the strength factor of the weakest link in the configuration which determines what the partners will be able to do. So see to it that your juniors (who will grow into the show team later) learn these correct techniques right from the start, and introduce them to these exercises slowly, so they can be useful when they become the reserve vaulters for the show team.

A vaulting team undergoes constant change, as during the crucial years the children grow rather quickly, and the change from flyer to underman can happen within one or two years! Don't forget that fast growth also affects strength! There is often a time when you can't use a vaulter for either — he has become too big and heavy to be a flyer, but is not yet strong enough to

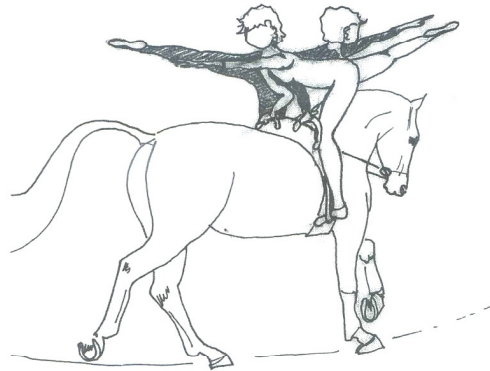
lift his partners. Sometimes vaulters can very well be undermen in kneeling positions, but not lift with their arms. Always discuss with your vaulters what they feel comfortable in doing, and watch that they don't overexert themselves to show off.

If you have reflected on the difficulties of various exercises and the appropriate bail-out, it will be quite simple for you to decide how to build up the progression from simple to complex for your vaulters. But you must teach them correct technique right from the start, and disciplined cooperation on the horse: so just a few words about that.

Since it is much easier to correct a double rather than a triple, start with that. Because now you have to train your eye to detect the mistakes made by two (and later three) vaulters in relationship to the horse! Does the exercise fail, because the supporting vaulter is unbalanced on the horse, or the flyer on him, or both are off the gravity point in relationship to the horse? Is the routine insecure, because they grip each other the wrong way, or have the sequence of grips mixed up?



Wheelbarrow



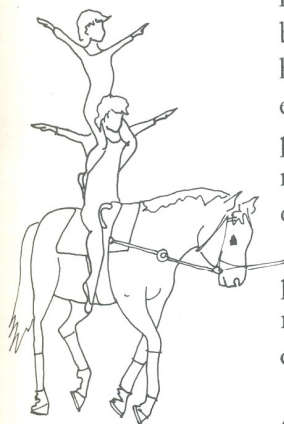
Double stirrup arabesque

Of course you start them in walk. But always keep in mind that the goal is to perform in canter. Therefore it is of the utmost importance that the sequence of grips, which you (in conjunction

with your vaulters) decide to be the most logical and most secure one, be followed consistently by the whole team and in every repetition of the exercise. Should the horse spook when you later perform in canter, then every vaulter knows exactly where to grip, one partner knows what to expect of the other in terms of the next move, and this greatly adds to your chance of avoiding accidents.

The 'shoulder sit'

One of the first double exercises will be the 'shoulder sit', if you have a team, which is mixed in size and age. The underman has to be strong enough to support the flyer, so choose them accordingly. When you first correct them on the barrel, mention straight body line and upright spine to your underman again; don't let him slouch. Refer to chapter 11 for correct body posture in exercises. The flyer also has to sit straight, so as not to throw his partner off balance. Let them do it *wrongly* on the barrel and make them *feel* what it does to the balance of the whole configuration!



It is important that the underman learns to feel whether the person on top is the cause for his imbalance, because he can then mention that to his flyer during training, or if it is a result of his own difficulties in relationship to the horse's motion.

These doubles are the beginning of the vaulters' understanding that they cease to be individuals in a team exercise. As mentioned before, laying blame on the partner for failures of a team exercise is out of the question. Never allow fighting! If an exercise does not work, it simply means that one must find the mistake: you as the trainer have to be able to see it, and where it is hard to determine visually, you have to be able to get it out of the vaulters through discussion. In any case, it has to be solved. So now you explain the position of the gravity point of a configuration, rather than a single body on the horse. This must be aligned just like a single, down in a straight line from the top

onto the horse's spine, and sideways neither right or left of it.

Again explain what the underman has to anticipate in terms of unexpected motions from the horse. Simulate on the barrel by giving them a gentle push, what it will feel like, when the horse suddenly stops – the height extension of having a flyer sit on top of you really makes a difference. It's a bit like doing a brake check, while driving with a heavy trailer for the first time... Gently push him from the front to simulate a sudden acceleration, from the side of sideways shying of the horse. There are many ways to prepare your vaulters for reality, before they perform something in canter.

- *The sequence of grips:* Depending on the exercise, there might be no sequence, but rather just one grip. But the example of the 'shoulder sit' is a good one for more complex moves, although the exercise is very simple. After vaulter number two has mounted, she hangs on to the shoulders of the underman in front of her to stand up. This should be done gently over the kneel and without digging pointed toes into the kidneys of the horse. She then stands with feet turned slightly outwards directly behind the underman, whereupon he holds up his hands to support her. An inexperienced flyer will then take the underman's inside hand and hold onto his head with the outside hand. (Experienced vaulters don't hang on to people's heads any more!) The underman lets his outside arm sink, to make room for the flyer, while she is passing the outside leg over his shoulder. She then 'locks' this foot behind his back, by turning the toes toward his spine. Now the hand positions get changed: the underman reaches up with his outside hand and supports the flyer, while she grabs onto his head with the inside hand, to pass the inside leg over the other shoulder, while he lets that arm hang down. She then locks her foot, balances herself, and lets both hands go to stretch the arms to the side. Depending on how balanced and strong the underman is, he does likewise. Don't instruct the underman

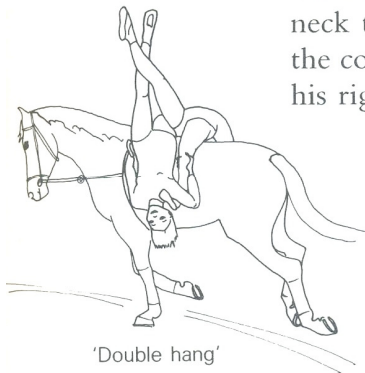
to let go, if the horse is jittery or the vaulter insecure. In walk, again make them simulate sudden stops and accelerations of the horse. Halt the horse, while the exercise is still built up, and get him going again. Once the vaulters have understood cause and effect, they just need to be reminded of the eventualities and can start to let anticipation become second nature to them.

Why should the outside leg go over first? In walk this is not evident, but in canter the vaulters begin to feel the effects of centrifugal force. It is safer to stand on the inside foot, while lifting the first leg, because this moves the flyers gravity point to the inside – less chance of losing her right away! This is why they should also dismantle the exercise the same way: inside leg comes off first, then the vaulter has a secure foot to stand on with her weight counteracting the force of gravity. The sequence of grips will be the same.

The 'double hang'

In the double hang one vaulter completely supports the other, and the weight of the two vaulters must be distributed very evenly on both sides of the horse – otherwise the configuration might slip to one side. The first vaulter mounts and immediately slips his outside foot through the stirrup. Then the second vaulter mounts, and as soon as the first has passed his inside leg over the neck to assume the outside side seat, he starts going down into the cossack hang. He then securely grips the second vaulter with his right hand on her (inside) leg, passing his arm over her shin

and grabbing her with the hand from the back, in the hollow of the knee. Now the second vaulter shifts her weight slightly to the outside to feel some pull on the leg, then passes her outside leg over the front to the inside, and lets herself down into the hang as well. When the weight of the two is evenly distributed, both free legs of the vaulters go up to cross in a V shape over the horse.



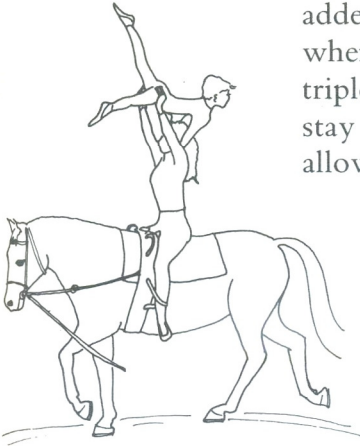
'Double hang'

Some word of caution, before you do this in canter: check the tightness of the surcingle. Check whether on your surcingle the stirrup loops do not come up too high, so vaulter number one hangs too low – this exercise can not be done with every surcingle, if the vaulters can not freely balance over the horse's back. If the loop is high, the vaulters must be small. The two vaulters must be matched in size *and* weight and must hang evenly and in a balanced fashion on both sides of the horse. (In other words: this is not an 'underman-flyer' exercise!)

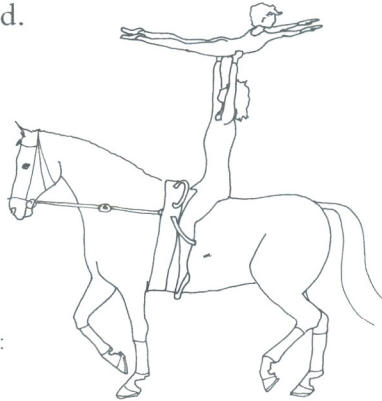
- *The sequence of grips:* Here of course the sequence is very important, especially when coming up again. The outside vaulter comes up first, the inside (first) vaulter *must* stay down until receiving a sign (little tap) from the second vaulter, signalling that she is up *and* has regained her balance in that position (sitting in seat number 2 without hanging on to anything can *also* be pretty bouncy!) *Only then* will vaulter 1 release his grip of her knee and come up himself, to proceed by swinging his leg back to the inside. When the outside vaulter (number 2) starts coming up, the weight on vaulter number 1's hand becomes less, and this is often the point when junior vaulters think they can now let go. But vaulter number 2 still has her buttock way on the outside of the horse's side and has therefore no means of balancing herself without being supported. And if *not* supported, she will of course go down head first!

If this sounds very dangerous to you, let me reassure you: the double hang was always considered an easy exercise, and really *is*, if executed correctly. But the point I want to drive home is, that *all* exercises are potentially dangerous if taught in an incorrect or negligent way, and *none* have to be, if practised with proper technique, foresight and the anticipation and correction of potential trouble.

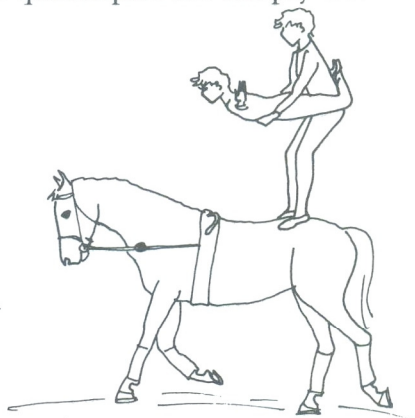
There are many double exercises and a great variety from easy to very difficult. In many doubles a third vaulter can be



Not too difficult with light-weight flyer, as holding points are secure: 'Skater's lift'



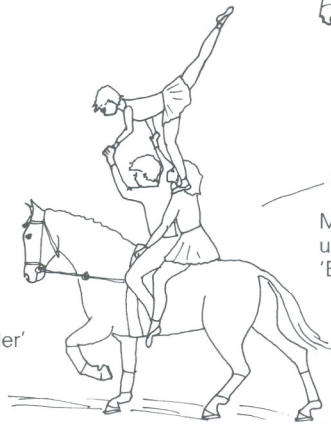
Very difficult to balance. Requires excellent body tension and precision of the flyer: 'Diver'



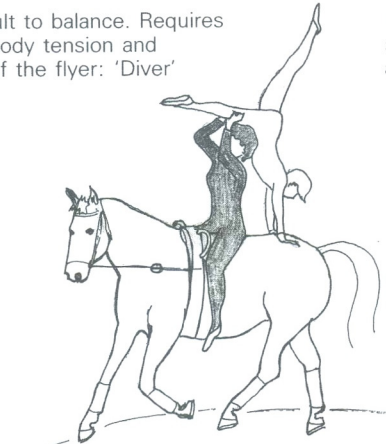
Requires secure balance of supporting partner: 'Carried angel'



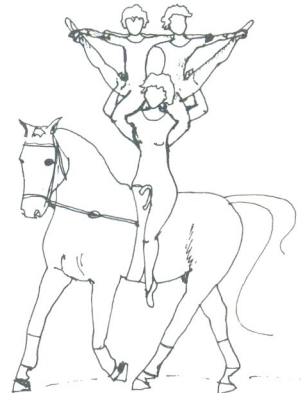
'Free stand on shoulder'



Third partner for added support and security: 'Shoulder arabesque'



More complexity in direction: upside down and backward: 'BW assisted handstand'



Not permitted – why? (two of the three vaulters must stay in contact with the horse)