

26 *How to train for your kur*

The run-in

To simplify things, let's start with a show. Plan for ten minutes, plus two minutes for run-in and run-out. Don't underestimate the time you will need to practise those, either! With an indisciplined bunch of 'babies' this can be an exasperating task! Running in, every vaulter should be in step. They can either line up next to the horse, or line up on two sides of him, or fan out. We have done shows where all the vaulters do a cartwheel to end up in line, or fan out and curtsey — it's up to your imagination and the discipline of the team. They then all bow together, facing the audience, or bow and turn and bow again, if the spectators are sitting on two sides of the arena.



In competition you can choose how you want to present your team; curtseys (if you have an all female team) are permitted, but fancier than that you should not get. Cartwheels and handstand-walkovers are felt to be too circus-like. In competition the team *must* face the main judge for the salute, and *only* he will be saluted. (Judge A will be defined by his position. If there are several judges you'll have to find out before the run-in which table he is at.)

Pick some really upbeat music for the run-in, because you want to get those spectators enthused straight away. The run-in is always done in trot. Let your vaulters run and time it with a stop watch as soon as you have determined the way. Leave the length of the piece of music flexible (don't make it too short) if you don't know the lie of the land of the facility where you'll be showing, because your approach may be a little longer than

anticipated. It makes a bad impression if the music runs out – whereas if you have a bit too much you can always use that for the first canter round to warm up the horse. Then practise the run-in and salute on music before every training session.

For competition, tape the run-in music onto a different tape from the main show, so there is no danger of the time lap in between not being accurate. When the judge gives the signal to start, the first vaulter *must* be on the horse within a minute – music or not. When you have put a lot of effort into timing your show onto music, you don't want to risk having it begin too early or too late. So simply instruct the person at the sound table to switch tapes after the run-in and have both tapes stopped at the correct spot, so all he has to do is start them.

Inexperienced vaulters will not perform their *show* precisely in time with the music, but the run-in should fit. Your tallest vaulter will be at the head of the run-in line if you are leading the horse; if not, the second tallest will run first and the biggest takes the horse. The first person in line will carry the lunge whip in his hand and give the horse a little tap with it, if he is unwilling to enter the ring. Discuss the run-in path with her or him, as soon as you arrive at the show facility, so there is no confusion about where to line up and which way to face. You may choose to run in with your team, if you are lunging, or join them from the side once they have lined up. In competition, the lunger always runs in with the team, as he is considered an integral part of it, and therefore *must* salute with them.

After the salute, the team will leave the circle on a predetermined way, in a neat line and in step, running to the point outside the circle, where you want them to line up. Teach them right from the beginning that while in line for a show, all arms must be held in the same fashion (behind the back works best for beginners) and scratching, bending and wiggling around is not making a good impression. Somebody nowadays always makes a video – show them how evident bad behaviour in the back line is to the audience!

While the team is lining up somewhere in the back (showing their fronts to the spectators) you let the horse out in the circle and direct him to canter. The vaulters in the first planned exercise will join you in the circle right away, and as soon as you 'open the gate' at the correct spot in the music, they will approach and start the show.

The music

As mentioned before, the run-in music will be very upbeat and befitting the trot speed of your horse and team. You will start to train the canter—walk—trot—canter phases (or whatever they will be) of your show, first separately, and time them with the stop watch, as soon as they work more or less. Keep in mind that over a six-week period the vaulters will improve and get slightly faster. Then in the show they have a tendency to get faster again, because they are nervous. If you teach them consistently to count the four or five beats (or three in competition) for which they have to hold their static exercises, you can get a fairly accurate estimate of the necessary time quite early in the game.

For an inexperienced team you may of course choose some kind of background music so that the different phases of the show do not matter. In that case, tape something that will be long enough for sure, and put some reliable person next to the stereo to turn it down slowly, then off, when the show is finished. But as your team gets better and more accurate, it is fun to try to 'stay on the music'. The vaulters will learn to recognize when they get close to the end of the canter piece and whether they therefore have to hurry a bit or slow down, because they are performing too fast — and the trot piece will be very different in speed and mood. This of course harbours the risk that you might really miss your music. Often our last training sessions were dead on and we were all smiles — and then in the show the kids got so fast that we had miles of music left over!

But it is worth trying for, because they have to learn sooner or later – and the audience does not seem to notice the mistakes in most cases. Vaulting judges later on however will, so the sooner the vaulters learn to keep their ears with them when vaulting, the better.

In competitions it is prescribed that you perform with instrumental music only. This makes sense, as you don't want to distract the judges, rather just paint a fitting background to your performance. The same is true for shows, but since it is sometimes very difficult to find interesting music of the right mood which is wholly instrumental, you can use songs as well. Or you might *want* the audience to sing along. I think that Country Western Songs are quite all right when showing at a rodeo. Many good teams perform on classical music, but get the input of your vaulters before you choose. They must like to perform to the chosen piece – and who knows what will be 'cool' by the time you read this book. My troop wanted to vault on rap – and they gave it up after three songs by their own decision.

If you work with a metronome (you can get quite sophisticated) canter speed lies at around 100 to 110, and most of these pieces fit for walk too. Tempo 85 to 95 is very collected canter. Most classical marches are around tempo 100, and many of those were composed for horse shows. Trot music is around tempo 150, and if you have a very regular horse, you'll be able to fit something exactly onto his step.

The sequence of turns

Very young teams *will* sometimes forget their turns, so have an adult behind the line to prompt if necessary. Don't let your team get used to this service for too long though; it is unprofessional, and every six-year-old is able to learn four to five turns by heart! In competitions prompting is out of the question. You are there to show the level of performance your team is capable of – if this means writing a simple kur, because they are too young to

remember anything else — so be it! You are presenting their brainpower as well as their muscles, and I have *never* experienced that a young vaulter was not able to learn his sequence of turns, if *not* knowing them meant exclusion from the competition.

There are different ways to learn the sequence: they can write numbers next to each block, that is, learn that they are 'second, then fifth in the first canter block, fourth and fifth in the walk, no turns in trot, and third/fourth/fifth in the second canter block'. This is a good method for very young juniors — the easiest way to memorize. But not the best! Obviously, if someone else messes up their turn (simply forgets it and does not run in) everything else will be out of phase and chaos ensues. It is better to learn that 'I'm doing this, after A, B and C are doing that, then I stay on the horse for exercise X and dismount over the front after Y has mounted.' The best way to learn is of course to know the complete routine, and be able to skip an exercise without losing control of the whole show. Some of my teams have done incredible feats of improvisation, once turns were forgotten. Their sequence of exercises looked so fluid and worked out, it could have been written by myself. . .

The lunger must concentrate on the horse, while staying aware of what is going on up top, in order to know when to bring the horse into walk after canter promptly and without making a 'hole' in the show. S/he must help to keep an ear for the music, tell the kids to slow down or speed up — and if the horse is jumpy, to anticipate each exercise with a stand to try and prevent irregularities. So you'll have your hands full! Tell your older vaulters to prompt *you*, if they realize you have been too busy to notice that the trot piece should start here. . . not just to stand behind your gate, waiting! Remind them that you are also a part of the team, everybody takes on responsibility for everyone else.

Of course it helps the vaulters in training if they get the written show into their hands early and few (if any) changes are made to it. Don't throw the sequence at them a half hour before the show. And don't confuse them by re-writing your show five

times. The last changes should be made two weeks before the show, as this is the point where all the exercises should be excluded which somehow don't work until then. While training for a show, tell the team to bring their sheet with the written show *every* practice session, so they can mark these changes when they occur. Otherwise they might mistake you for their secretary and you can spend your time re-typing, re-copying and passing the rewritten sequences out again and again.

The canter pieces

With a bit of experience you can begin timing the length of your canter pieces even in walk. Let someone push during the mounts, as these happen of course faster when in canter, then count for your vaulters holding the exercise with the speed you remember from your horse. Time differences later will actually not occur in the static exercises, but mostly in the mounts and transitions. If two vaulters are mounting one after the other, the second one must run next to the horse, just far enough away not to disturb the mount of his partner, so he is there immediately when the first one is up. Beginners will waste enormous time during the mounts – encourage them to discipline themselves early. Advanced vaulters will grab the hand of a partner and mount directly without running for several steps. Juniors should be allowed to count the familiar '1, 2, 3, hop' for the mount, but not more! Running for over half a round should never be permitted, it is a sign of indecision, wastes the horse's energy and bores the audience. The horse may of course never run empty. Part of this rule is also consideration of the horse; you want to keep his work time really efficient. As soon as some vaulters start out for the horse, the participants in the *next* exercise run into the centre of the circle, but stay well behind your whip. Never let the lunger stand 'empty' in the middle either. Personally it makes me very nervous, when the next vaulters don't run in promptly, because while lunging for a show, I am concentrating

on the horse so much that I do not have time to look at the team to figure out whether they are asleep, or have forgotten their turns, or whatever else may be happening in the rank and file!

The walk phase

As you know, mounting in walk without the use of the horse's momentum is quite difficult, so arrange for a 'pusher' in case your beginners can't make it up. Instruct the pusher to *be* there, when needed (it will usually be a vaulter waiting to mount for the same exercise, or one of the next ones waiting in the circle) and give the push as quickly and inconspicuously as possible. It is a nightmare in a show to have the surcingle turn on you. Although you want to show off how well everyone can do by himself, don't risk having one of your inexperienced vaulters hang on the side of the horse, without help, while the grips are slowly sinking... You would have to stop the horse, take the surcingle off and refit – while your music is running out and the audience gets bored, not to mention the howling child, who ended up under the horse...

The trot part

Not much else has to be mentioned for the trot phase which does not also apply to the others, except that trot, depending on the horse, can be a lot bouncier than the previous ones. Do not put vaulters into undermen lifting positions, if they don't have the subtle hip movement to 'sit' the stride. They then have a tendency to bounce out of balance, slip right and left and feel very insecure. Trot is a good gait to show off the stand, and even a simple double stand, performed by two little ones will get a good round of applause. Transitions from the back to the neck can also present quite a problem to the junior in trot; don't use any which don't really work.

The salute and run-out

When the last vaulter dismounts, you collect the horse (which should stop for you on the track of the circle, instead of coming in) while he runs back into the line-up. The tallest vaulter starts running with the line to join you at the horse, as soon as he sees that you have managed to bring him into salute position – with thundering applause and waving flags this can be quite a job. Hopefully your helper at the stereo is awake and turns down the music a bit, if you have not used it up as you had planned. Your team then assumes their salute position. This will be a line or fan configuration in a competition, followed by a simultaneous bow from the members, including the lunger, basically the same as after the run-in. (If the horse acts up, the lunger can get away with a nod of his head.) In a show however, you should make a bit more of it – this is the time when most pictures are taken, and when the children finally hold still long enough, so the average photographer will get something into focus. Refer to the previous chapter for the ways to design this configuration, and train for it often enough that the vaulters can assume their position quickly and without hesitation. Stay away from intricate build-ups if the time to practise them was not sufficient. Nothing looks worse than an attempted line up, where kids run from the left to the right because they can't remember where their place should be...in that case, a simple line is preferable. However professional your team looks at the very end, this is the impression which every spectator will take home with him. And we want them back for more vaulting demonstrations.

If you arranged with the promoters that the children would receive a little gift, the person at the stereo must be aware of this and stop or turn down the music while it is happening. The children will drop back into line after dismantling their pyramid position, and give a visible sign of 'thank you' when handed the gift. Even this must be practised beforehand. You can of course use the same music for the run-out as in the beginning. Make

sure the whip was passed to the right person in time. You can also tape artificial applause over the last music – I have done this in shows, where I know in advance that the audience will be rather stingy with their signs of appreciation, but I needed the applause on the video for the next promotion...

Refer to the next chapter for the team's behaviour after the show. Tell them in advance before every show what you expect of them.