

Facing Fears ... Through Vaulting

By Anne T. Phinney

At age 47 I am living quite comfortably inside the box of “playing it safe.” By residing in here, I am guaranteed to never suffer a serious injury or jeopardize my ability to draw a steady income for the rest of my life.

This philosophy changed completely while attending a vaulting symposium at Root Farm in Verona, New York. The symposium was given by vaulting experts Rick Hawthorne and his wife, Virginia, founders of the Valley View Vaulters in Lake View Terrace, California, the largest vaulting club in America. Peter Senn, Root Farm’s vaulting coach and director of youth programming was there as well.

I was there to meet a vaulting mule named Deirdre, owned by the Root Farm founder, Alice Root, and the subject of a book I am writing. Two dear friends, photographer Michele deCamp and fel-

low horse trainer Missy Elleman, accompanied me. But is my philosophy about this so restricting that I am actually setting myself up for disaster? Over the years my desire to ride has never waned, but my adult common sense has begun to paralyze me, preventing my natural abilities from keeping me safe in a riding crisis. Now when my 10-year-old Thoroughbred gelding, Easau, spooks at a deer in the woods, I am likely to spook bigger than he does. My sensible side knows I need to stop my behavior, but my “I can’t afford to get hurt” instinct sometimes prevents me from following through.

I am constantly adding to my list of things that I won’t do anymore. Galloping cross-country is out of the question, unless I am mounted on my tried-and-true 19-year-old Thoroughbred gelding Zambi and I ride a familiar route close to home. Jumping is pretty much nonexistent in my life, and forget starting young horses. I relished all of these activities in my youth, but I can no longer depend on the educated fearlessness of my gutsy 14-year-old self. Where did she go?

While watching the rubber children twist, turn and jump all over the barrel and knowing they were equally as capable of performing on a horse, I began to mourn my youthful physical capabilities. “Oh well, I am happy to be able to ride as much as I do,” I told myself.

Next, it was time to meet Deirdre, who was happily grazing in a field behind the indoor ring. I know very little about mules but learned quickly that they are not as gullible as horses. Deirdre was a bit standoffish as I approached her. With only dandelions to offer her, I eventually conveyed that I was no threat. Once we broke that barrier, she was my best friend. The longer I rubbed inside her long, swiveling ears, the deeper we bonded.

Later I helped a couple of young vaulters groom Deirdre. Currying her leftover winter coat, the children chattered about the possibility of vaulting on her later that afternoon. I enjoyed living vicariously through their enthusiasm but could only imagine the courage it took to vault on a lumbering equid. Little did I know,

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The indoor arena was abuzz with children and adults leaping and twisting all over stationary vaulting barrels. With selected background music, vaulters performed one-minute routines, called *Kürs*. They moved with ease, combining various positions such as a shoulder stand, a bridge, a flag and the impressive scissors movement. At the end of their routines, they gracefully leapt to their dismount before jogging over to the judge to bow.

After watching several children and adults compete on the vaulting barrel—I began to realize that vaulting challenges your mental as well as physical abilities. Vaulters channel their need for control to their bodies and perform amazing feats outside their safety boxes.

Safe in My Box

Riding horses is the most comfortable way for me to control my environment and remain safe inside my



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as I helped fasten the vaulting surcingle around her girth, I was actually preparing Deirdre so I could face my own fears.

While the vaulters attended their awards presentation, Deirdre and I took to the back of the arena where I quietly longed her. She circled effortlessly at the walk, trot and canter, but *my* arthritic hips were protesting pivoting at the center. These hips would prevent me from ever considering vaulting on a barrel or a horse. Add to that aching wrists, stiff back and trouble in my neck—not to mention intense fear—and vaulting would never be part of my box.

Lost in concentration of all that I couldn't do, I suddenly became aware of the crowd now making its way toward Deirdre and me. Alice mentioned that Pete and Rick would work Deirdre for a few minutes to make sure she was accepting of the surcingle (she hadn't been worked all winter), and then the mule would be ready for me to get on.

"What?" My brain screamed trying desperately to keep the box closed and define its perimeter clearly with the word "CAN'T."

Learning "I Can"

At this time I had a choice: Face my fear or confirm that I was too old to try a new skill. Something about Pete and Rick allowed me to choose the former. They were professional trust builders who never doubted I would be successful.

After fastening a helmet to my head, I took a giant step outside my box and climbed on Deirdre's back. At first it was very familiar territory as my trained riding position settled into its familiar place on her back and I took a secure hold of the handles on the surcingle.

Next, I was instructed to let go of the handles and stretch my arms out. So far, there was nothing to this—but that was the last time I recognized the lady from my box. As the instruction continued, she had to throw caution to the wind and her trust to Pete, Rick and Deirdre. Slowly I began to move all over Deirdre's back—up on



ABOVE: To complete her first vaulting lesson, Anne Phinney positions herself so her legs hang off Deirdre's left side and her head and shoulders hang off the right.



LEFT: With the help of Rick Hawthorne (left) and Peter Senn, Anne lifts her feet up and over her head.

BELOW: Flipping onto her feet, Anne screams in delight. Success!



my feet, one foot in the air and holding on with one hand. Then I stretched my toes out to Deirdre's dock. I sat backward and formed a cautious backbend with my feet on Deirdre's rump. In this position I prayed Deirdre would not consider me a predator and buck. Next I lifted one of my legs. She walked on

without a bit of concern.

With each task Rick and Pete gave me, my reflex to yell, "I can't," was wrestled and defeated by my body's response of, "I can." And I did. None of my movements were performed with style, but that didn't matter to anyone, least of all me.

Too soon it was time to wrap up the lesson, but Rick and Pete had one more maneuver left. With fearless ease I positioned myself with both legs hanging off of Deirdre's left side. Pete instructed me to lie back so my head and shoulders were hanging off of her right side.

They encouraged me to relax for a few seconds while stretching the stress out of my back. It felt so good to hang there that I was only mildly aware of Rick and Pete stepping closer and se-



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curing my arms with their hands. Then they instructed me to lift my feet up and over my head. Just as my brain began to make a last feeble attempt to run for my safety box, my body allowed me one more occasion to trust. Suddenly my legs appeared up and over my face as I flipped right onto my feet. My hands went up in the air, and I screamed in delight.

As I hugged Rick and Pete, it occurred to me that they had never doubted me. I could see they knew exactly what I had experienced. This is their passion and when a student, like me, gets it both physically and emotionally, there is an understanding between them. This makes their passion for the sport so profound. Vaulting requires a great deal of trust in others who will keep you safe and believe in you so you can believe in yourself.

Don't get me wrong. A half-pass and a lead change will make my day, but performing a back-flip dismount, no matter how much assistance was required, has changed my life. 🐾