



Breathtaking displays of vaulting at international level

# The art of vaulting

by Theresa Odendaal

**M**ost of us have seen vaulting on television, seen those graceful and fearless gymnasts performing seemingly impossible feats on horseback. But few of us know that it is alive and well as a sport in South Africa. *SA Horseman* spoke to Paula Taylor, who serves on the Gauteng Vaulting Committee, to learn more about this spectacular sport.

Although vaulting was recognised as a sport by the Federation Equestre Internationale (FEI) in the 1920's already, it was only introduced in South Africa in 1994. Vaulting is less costly than most other equestrian sports, as one horse can be used by a number of people and one does not need to own a horse to compete. It can be performed as a team with up to three people on the horse at one time, in pairs or individually. Vaulting has both compulsory and freestyle routines, which are set to music.

The sport requires physical coordination and incorporates beauty and elegance, power and

strength to produce a harmonious partnership on the horse. Trust is of the essence – a single miscalculation by one team member could send them all tumbling to the ground. It is a combination of horsemanship and gymnastics and the vaulters have to be very fit, toned and supple.

## The horse

In Europe, the average size of a vaulting horse is between 17-18 hh – some even bigger. That, says Paula, is still the biggest problem in South Africa. We don't have enough suitably big horses. The ideal vaulting horse is one with a steady, even temperament, not easily spooked, calm and accepting. Physically, it also has to be big and strong, without being clumsy. Its paces have to be balanced, steady, rhythmic and even.

Once a suitable horse has been found, it can take years to train it as the horse is not allowed to break pace, no matter what. As in dressage, a vaulting horse is also judged in competition on its obedience, rhythm,

suspension and soundness at the trot before the vaulting starts.

**Safety**

Safety is the most important aspect in vaulting, as the vaulters, unlike other equestrians, do not wear protective gear. Children are initially taught to perform the movements, first on a barrel, then on the horse at the walk, and at the canter. Side helpers are available to assist the vaulters until they are able to perform on their own. At all times, the horse is controlled on the lunge by a specialist lunger. The surcingle around the horse has handles for the vaulters to hold onto. The trot is never used in vaulting competitions.

**International exposure**

A South African vaulting team went to the World Equestrian Games in Aachen, Germany in September 2006. No South African team had ever been exposed to international competition at this level. The individual team (two boys, three girls and a reserve) and the mixed team (three boys and four girls) acquitted themselves very well. The young team is expected to be a force to be reckoned with at the next world games in 2010.



Should you want to take up the beautiful sport of vaulting, go to the THS Vaulting Committee's website [www.thsinfo.co.za](http://www.thsinfo.co.za) to find out where and how. SAH

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