

## **Imagine the Possibilities**

**By Gayle McCampbell and Terry Myers**

Satisfaction, pride, and exhilaration...just a few of the feelings that occur when we meet new challenges we set for ourselves. Whether as an instructor or rider, striving toward new goals will continue to keep our equine interest sparked. Therapeutic vaulting, as a program within your existing program or by itself, is an activity that stretches the mind, body and spirit into realms outside traditional riding activities.

Consider the simplicity of starting a vaulting program: the right horse, a competent lounge/instructor, and relatively few pieces of equipment – lunge line, whip, bridle, pad, surcingle and a vaulting barrel. It can all take place within and around a 60-meter circle. With these few basic ingredients a vaulting program can offer so much to so many people.

Opportunities to stretch the body are abundant! Take for instance a basic vaulting position called the "flag". Balancing on one hand and knee, with opposite arm and leg outstretched, requires strength, balance and flexibility. Imagine the level of concentration and focus necessary to keep your body in a unique position while the platform you are on, the horse, is in rhythmic motion.

Taking it down a notch, just lying supine with head on the rump, arms extended downward and legs astride the walking horse is a wonderful way to loosen and relax the entire body. Inherent in these simple activities is a chance to deepen a trusting relationship with the instructor and the horse. Moving the body out of the traditional seat and into alternative contacts with the horse intensifies the awareness of the horse's movement - the movement that we in the industry accredit with so much power.

Another possibility for physical stretch during a vaulting class is the vaulting barrel. Providing a site for skill practice and problem solving, the vaulting barrel is also an excellent prop for interaction and team building. Like a jungle gym, the barrel invites a cooperative playfulness that isn't always possible on the back of the horse. As long as safety and concern for horse and rider remain a priority, activities in vaulting are limitless. There are endless ways to engage the entire class with simultaneous activities on the barrel, the horse and the ground. This can multiply the communication, the motor planning and the fun!

When was the last time you really stretched your imagination? Well, try visualizing the various groups who could benefit from a vaulting class. Vaulting has been shown to be valuable as an adjunct to psychotherapy for individuals with eating disorders and a history of sexual abuse. Many adults, especially women, are looking for alternative ways to be active and stay in shape. A class may team up with a yoga instructor for a combination of a yoga warm up, followed by a strength and flexibility class, all on the back of a horse. Students involved in other riding disciplines often find that vaulting will improve their riding seat. And believe it or not, there are some people who are just not interested in riding, but will find enjoyment, relaxation, camaraderie, exercise and more in a vaulting class. A creative component to vaulting can be music. Who more than a

teenager loves to put on their favorite song and move to its beat? Combine this with more kids and a horse and the fun really begins!

The idea of stretching the spirit is a little harder to articulate but it is real. Putting control of the horse in someone else's hands allows for deepening trust in the horse and the handler. And the resultant freedom can be liberating. Imagine riding hands-free while moving in synchrony with the horse at a trot. Consider the satisfaction and pride that one would feel while confidently standing tall on a walking horse. The tremendous sensory input inherent to vaulting heightens body awareness. It provides a great opportunity to "tune in" to one's physical self as well as emotional state. Cooperative communication between vaulters on the horse or the barrel offers a unique experience for friendship and respect.

Is it time for a stretch? Give vaulting a try.