

Vaulting – A Dynamic Approach To Therapeutic Riding

By Gisela Rhodes

What comes to mind when you hear the word “vaulting? Perhaps you envision a horse wildly cantering in a circle, with children standing on the horse doing flips and other hair raising stunts? If that is the image, then most likely you have never thought that vaulting could have any role in your therapeutic riding center. But therapeutic vaulting is an exciting and growing trend at NARHA centers and one that may well be worth knowing about.

What Is It?

Therapeutic vaulting is a modification of traditional vaulting. The basic vaulting positions are taught, as are exercises, but many other aspects are added and subtracted depending on the needs of the individual vaulters. The appeal of a therapeutic vaulting class is that it provides an environment where the vaulter can progress at his/her own speed while still being part of a group working together. Instead of being competitive the class is designed to encourage teamwork, to discover and practice new skills and to have fun. In most cases side walkers are not needed and the vaulter has the opportunity to enjoy the company of the horse and concentrate on what s/he is doing without a lot of distractions from side walkers or a leader.

How Does It Work?

At White Oak Farm our vaulting class usually consists of 4-6 vaulters and lasts 60-90 minutes. We have mixed groups (able bodied and kids with disabilities), or more homogenous groups from schools with certain disorders like ADD/ ADHD, anxiety and fear issues, eating disorders or mild physical disabilities. A typical therapeutic vaulting class includes grooming, exercises on and around the barrel (see photo p.) and the horse, and games. Lessons can have different focal points like increasing balance and strength, reducing anxieties or working on creativity, all depending on the needs of the vaulters. While increasing physical and mental well being, activities always include components such as team work, having fun and getting to know the horse better.

Lessons are divided into different phases:

- Phase 1: Tuning in with the horse
- Phase 2: Warming up
- Phase 3: Working
- Phase 4: Relaxing
- Phase 5: Saying good bye

Phase 1: We start with a thorough grooming of the horse where the vaulters take turns in currying, brushing, cleaning feet and beautifying the mane and tail. During grooming we take the opportunity to name body parts of the horse and answer any questions the vaulters might have about the horse. Sometimes the questions mirror whatever goes on in the vaulter's life at that point (for example: “Does she have a boyfriend? Has she had a baby? Does she like to work?”).

Phase 2: After tacking up we warm up the horse and vaulters at the same time. This gives us the opportunity to evaluate the condition of the horse that day, if she is sound and content to do her job. While she walks on the lunge line on a circle the vaulting group plays movement games. Especially in the beginning it is important to introduce the vaulters slowly to the horse and give them confidence. The same horse that stood still for grooming can look a lot scarier when she is walking on a circle attached to a lunge line but without anybody actually leading her at her head.

So for example, the vaulters take turns in walking along the lunge line towards the horse, pat her on the shoulder and come back to the instructor into the middle of the circle. To warm up the muscles in both the horse and the vaulters, we incorporate games like 'Horse Tail'. The vaulters stay in a safe distance behind the horse and keep up with her walking, trotting and sometimes even cantering while moving forward, sideways and backwards. It sounds easy, but it actually demands a lot of skills such as coordination, concentration, balance and agility from the vaulters. Of course it is also plenty of fun to topple over each other while trying to keep an eye on the horse and stay out of her way!

Phase 3: During this phase we work on the goals of our lesson, for example balance. Since not everybody might be capable of doing certain exercises, we can individualize them according to the abilities of the individual vaulter. While one vaulter is on the horse the rest of the group practices on the barrel or on the ground. (With some groups it might be helpful to have a volunteer direct the activities so the vaulting instructor can concentrate fully on the vaulter on the horse.)

A good balance exercise on the ground is the "tree position". The vaulter stands on one foot, rests the other foot on the inside of the thigh of the standing leg and stretches the arms upwards. This position takes some concentration and everybody will realize very quickly that without focusing he/she will fall over. It is important to remind everybody to keep breathing! Another more active balance exercise is walking over a cavaletti (or a pole, that rests on 2 blocks) with variations like walking sideways, backwards or with eyes closed. This is also a good team exercise: some vaulters might be fearful to walk over the pole with eyes closed and might need some assistance from one or two fellow vaulters. In the mean time vaulters take turn practicing on the barrel the correct kneeling position while the vaulter on the horse kneels, practices the flag or stands up (again, according to ability). This phase can last several turns with vaulters rotating between ground, barrel and horse.

Phase 4: This phase is designed to pull the group back together. Games like 'Hot/Cold' are great to encourage discussions between the group and trying to achieve a consensus. The group decides what exercise the vaulter on the horse is supposed to perform and whispers the decision into the instructor's ear. She can then decide if this is an appropriate exercise for that particular vaulter. Amazingly, in most groups the vaulters are very tuned into the capabilities of each other and adjust their demands accordingly without judging. The vaulter on the horse then offers different positions and the group lets her/him know when s/he is getting closer with a 'hot', or with a 'cold' when it is nothing like the group imagined. Vaulters with fear issues are more inclined to try different positions during this game, while the group is willing to support vaulters with hints etc. There are plenty of games that can fit into this phase and soon the group will let you know on uncertain terms which one they want to play.

Phase 5: In the last phase we direct the attention to the horse again and attend to her needs. We let her cool down if she cantered or trotted a lot and ask all the vaulters to give her nice pats and thank her. If we have the arena for ourselves, we have the opportunity to untack her right there and let her free. Vaulters are often fascinated with a 'loose horse'. They might show different reactions that can range from being scared to very daring. They might try to entice the horse to follow them and they might succeed or not. They ask questions like 'How come she is not following me? How can I make her do things?' It makes the vaulters realize, that the horse is a living being with feelings, likes, dislikes and a mind of her own.

The last task of course is taking care of the tack and returning the horse back to the stall or paddock after a quick grooming.

This is one example of a vaulting lesson. Depending on the needs of the vaulters one can adjust the length or intensity of the phases accordingly. It is important to remember that the horse should be the main focal point, while the instructor 'just' works as a facilitator and tries to stay in

the background as much as possible. Children are more willing to change inappropriate behavior if the horse acts as the disciplinarian instead of the instructor. We get better results with pointing out to the children that the horse does not like them throwing sand (and of course mentioning the horse's reactions like ears pinning, speeding up or whatever your horse does) than with a direct order from the instructor, " Stop throwing sand".

So now you may be interested in therapeutic vaulting and how this exciting activity can fit your therapeutic riding center? Here is how you start developing a safe vaulting program:

- Get the NARHA Therapeutic Vaulting Standards, they will give you a good overview about the prerequisites.
- Get hands-on experience at workshops offered by the United States Dressage Association (USDF for lungeing), American Vaulting Association (AVA for competitive vaulting) or members of the NARHA Vaulting Committee (specialized in lungeing and therapeutic vaulting).
- You should be trained and tested by an expert on safe lungeing, the use of specialized equipment and be able to demonstrate familiarity with vaulting exercises and appropriate stretching exercises.
- It is crucial that your horse is sound, fit and trained well in order to tolerate all the commotion without blinking an eye. Obedience to the instructor is a prerequisite.
- You need special equipment (like a barrel, a surcingle, lunge line, side reins etc.) and a safe environment.
- Read up on vaulting/lungeing and other relevant techniques
- If you have any questions, please don't hesitate to contact the NARHA Vaulting Committee.

Bio: Gisela H. Rhodes, M.Ed., is the cofounder of Special Equestrians, Inc. (Therapeutic Riding Program) and White Oak Farm (Boarding and Riding Stable) in Jefferson, MA. She is a NARHA Registered and a German Vaulting Instructor (Betreuer), Chair of the NARHA Vaulting Subcommittee and an EFMHA Board member.