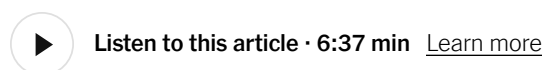


The Art of Performing Gymnastics on a Moving Horse

The sport is called vaulting, and a major competition will be held at the World Equestrian Festival this weekend in Aachen, Germany.



Listen to this article • 6:37 min [Learn more](#)

By Hannah Wulkan

June 26, 2025

Dancing requires memorizing intricate choreography and synchronizing with your performing partners. Gymnastics requires being able to throw yourself in the air and twist into unbelievable positions. And horseback riding requires balance and being in tune with your horse.

Vaulting? It requires all of the above.

The sport, in essence, is best described as gymnastics on horseback. But despite how hard that sounds, much more goes into it than is seen.

The sport is practiced individually, in a pair or as part of a squad made up of six competitors, with up to three people on a horse at once. The athletes hop on and off the moving horse — who is being lunged, or controlled in a large circle while connected to a handler — performing maneuvers such as handstands, spins and jumps on its back. They then are judged on their skill, artistry and harmony with the horse.

“It should look easy, easy and fluent and with a happy horse, this is the picture we want to see,” said Ulla Ramge, the president of the vaulting jury at the Aachen World Equestrian Festival in Germany, a top equestrian competition that brings together five disciplines — show jumping, dressage, eventing, driving and vaulting — and begins on Friday.

It’s “important for us, especially for Aachen, to present the sport on a high level, and seeing how vaulter and lunge and horse are working together in harmony,” said Kersten Klophaus, manager of the vaulting competition in Aachen.

At high level competitions like the one in Aachen, vaulters perform in several events:

Individuals and squads compete in the compulsory program, which has eight required exercises, and the freestyle, in which vaulters choose their own choreography and music.

Individual vaulters also compete in the technical program, which has five required exercises but allows them to add their own moves as well, and to choose their own music.

Pairs compete in two rounds of freestyle competition.

Not only does the sport require athletes to be aware of their own bodies, they must be aligned with the horse, too, working out its rhythm and motion, and with the lunger controlling the horse.

“You can really see if someone’s not in tune with their horse,” said Kimberly Palmer, 30, an American vaulter competing in Aachen this weekend. But, she added, “when you’re one with your horse, it’s almost like you’re gliding or you’re floating, it just looks very even, on one level you look like, I don’t know, graceful, like a feather just floating with the horse.”

This can be made even more difficult when vaulters traveling overseas sometimes have to borrow a horse and then adapt to its idiosyncrasies quickly.



Tessa Divita and her horse Glenn, competing at a vaulting competition earlier this month in Krumke, Germany. Julia Schwartz

“It’s a very specific skill that I think — that’s not practiced in other high level F.E.I. disciplines,” said Tessa Divita, 27, another American vaulter competing in Aachen, referring to the governing body of equestrian sport, the Fédération Equestre Internationale. “Being able to, like, bond with a horse quickly and learn their way of movement, learn the things they like, the things they don’t like” is an underrated skill, she added.

When putting together their routines, vaulters consider timing, artistry and maneuvers that play to their strengths — and to those of their horses.

“We try to create our routine with creative difficult moves in between each technical move,” Palmer said.

“Every movement I do is trying to find some highlight with the music, and I’m trying to express myself,” Divita said. “Even when I’m doing handstands, I’m also thinking about, OK, where are we? How are we keeping going?”

And when it comes to picking music, the athletes seek inspiration wherever they can find it. Divita looked to her Spotify Wrapped and picked two of her most-played songs: “Pink Pony Club,” by Chappell Roan, and “Popular,” from the musical “Wicked.”

“There were lots of opportunities for me to express myself within the music,” she said.

The music and risky skills on display can also lead to excitement in the audience. Unlike with many equestrian sports, the stands are not silent as the vaulters perform their maneuvers, Range said. During a vaulting competition, “There’s more enthusiasm, more atmosphere, more spirit.”

Performances are evaluated by multiple judges. In Aachen, there are four members of the jury; each of their scores are worth 25 percent of the tally. Two focus entirely on the technical achievements within the routine, the degree of difficulty and how well each move is executed. One looks at the artistry of the vaulters, including the composition of their routines and the interpretation of the music and how well the vaulter is in tune with the horse. And the fourth judges the horse, including its movement and the communication between it and the lunger.



Kathrin Meyer performing with her horse at the Aachen World Equestrian Festival last year. At the F.E.I. Vaulting World Cup Final 2024, she became the first woman to win the World Cup Final back to back. CHIO Aachen/Jasmin Metzner

“The perfect vaulter,” Ramge said, “is as one with his horse in the movement. They move together and they are balanced together. And the perfect vaulter has a fluent way to move. He’s an artist, he’s a gymnast, we see strengths, we see flexibility, and we see coordination of movements, and the perfect vaulter is able to do those fluent exercises of a high complexity together with the horse.”

That complexity is only increased when more athletes are added to the mix. In the pas de deux, or pairs, competition, two vaulters are on the horse at once, performing a routine together, similar to pairs figure skating. In a squad event, six vaulters perform a routine together, with up to three people on the horse at a time, all switching out, jumping on and off the moving horse.

“The cool thing about vaulting is the collaboration between, like, the triangle: the horse, lunger and vaulter,” Divita said. “And then when you introduce more people, I just think that collaboration becomes more interesting and gives more opportunities for creativity and different expressions.”

While many equestrian sports come down to the horse-rider pair, vaulting is always a team sport, whether competing individually or as part of a larger group, Divita said: “There’s always at least three units out in the arena at any given point. You’re never by

yourself.”

A version of this article appears in print on , Section A, Page 11 in The New York Times International Edition