

# SOARING WITH EAGLES

by Janice Reiter



One horse can work for a number of vaulters. Here Orbital Control, a 17.3 hh Percheron/Quarter Horse-cross, is the center of attention for members of the Sky Vaulters. *Janice Reiter photo*

If your idea of “getting air” is the childhood game of leap frog, then you had better fasten your seat belt.

**M**an’s fascination with being airborne is basically, timeless. Combine that with our dependence on the horse and is it really much of a surprise there are stone paintings, dating back to 1500 B.C., depicting man standing on horses?

### The Day Before Yesterday

Did you know Julius Caesar was entertained not only by gladiators and chari-

ot races but by men dancing on the backs of cantering horses? Or that King Arthur’s Knights of the Round Table, when not encased in armor, did more than sit astride their war horses?

Dancing on horseback was christened “La Voltige” by the French aristocracy in the Baroque era. During this lavish and excessive time the activity was viewed as an indication of wealth and status. The name morphed into vaulting and it became a staple training tool

for the European Cavalry.

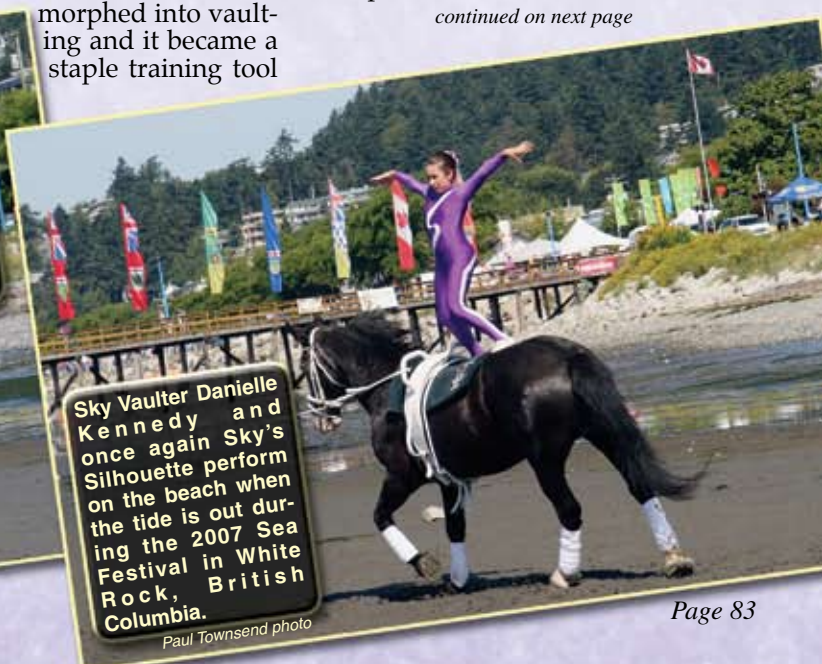
The roots of modern day vaulting are firmly encased in Germany, which after World War II, introduced it as an exercise to benefit general riding skills. You could say the sport caught on, as it is estimated that Germany, alone, has 50,000 vaulters today.

The sport ventured across the Atlantic in the mid-1950s in the form of a 16 mm film. While visiting Europe, American Elizabeth Serle first

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Vaulting horses can have a long career, when looked after properly. This gorgeous day on the beach marked the farewell performance of Sky’s Silhouette. The 22-year-old 15.2 hh Shire-cross mare was retired after ten years as a beloved partner to a long string of Sky Vaulters like Sasha Fort. *Paul Townsend photo*



Sky Vaulters Danielle Kennedy and once again Sky’s Silhouette perform on the beach when the tide is out during the 2007 Sea Festival in White Rock, British Columbia. *Paul Townsend photo*



**Yossi, Noel and Erik Martonovich ham it up during the opening ceremonies of the 2007 US/AVA National Championships held in Denver, Colorado.** Daniel K Photography photo

*Soaring With Eagles continued*  
witnessed the sport. Upon returning to her pony club in California, she proceeded to turn on a movie projector. In 1966, Serle became one of the founders of the American Vaulting Association (AVA).

Over the years the sport, in North America, has loped along on the fringe of public awareness, with a couple of vaulting demonstrations at the summer Olympic Games being the high spots. But the sport has suffered from a lack of identity—was it straight gymnastics or an equestrian discipline? Two things happened to define and legitimize the sport; one was vaulting's inclusion in the World Equestrian Games (WEG). The other was making the horse a part of the equation by allocating 20% of the score to the horse's performance.

Under the auspices of the Fédération Equestre Internationale (FEI), the international governing body of equestrian sport, the WEGs are held every four years. Relatively new on the world scene, the first WEGs were held in Stockholm, Sweden in 1990, where six disciplines took center stage: show jumping, dressage, eventing, driving, vaulting and endurance. At the 2002 games held in Jerez, Spain, a seventh discipline, reining, made its debut. To date all the WEGs have been held in Europe, though that is about to change in 2010, when the games will venture to North America for the first time. The Kentucky Horse Park in Lexington, Kentucky, will welcome the world and the addition of para-equestrian, the eighth discipline.

### **Airs Above the Ground**

"Vaulting was originally meant to help kids become better riders but it has evolved into a sport that combines the strength of gymnastics with the elegance and bravado of dance," says Noel Martonovich of Golden, Colorado, who currently sits



**Erik & Pokey: How it all began.** photo courtesy of N. Martonovich

### **The Man with the Golden Horses**

Who could have foretold when the three-year-old toddler clambered aboard his pony that a vaulting phenom was in the making?

Several years later, after watching a vaulting demonstration in 1985, Noel Martonovich, felt this looked like something her son would enjoy. Already bored with merely sitting on his pony, six-year-old Erik found it to be a natural fit.

"I liked horses and adrenaline," recalls Erik. "Vaulting looked like a great way to combine the two. At the time I just thought it was fun to stand on horses."

Not exactly a mainstream equestrian activity, Erik was fortunate to have a vaulting club in his home town of Golden, Colorado, which he trained and competed with for eight years. By the time he reached his early teens it became apparent competitive vaulting was something to take seriously, instigating the formation of the Golden Gate Vaulters.

It was while attending a summer vaulting camp in California that the 14-year-old was introduced to Belgian horses. Upon returning to Colorado, the totally smitten young man sold his Quarter Horse/Thoroughbred-cross and bought himself a Belgian mare.

Along with a new horse came gymnastic training with Alexei Koudria, who had been the successful senior trainer of the Belarussian National Gymnastic team, plus extensive dance lessons with the Denver based Cleo Parker Robinson Dance School.



**A long way from home. Erik Martonovich and Doc compete at the 2002 World Equestrian Games in Jerez, Spain.** N. Martonovich photo

"He transferred the lessons he learned in dance and gymnastics to the horse and came out with his own style," said Noel. "The stability and steadiness of our draft horses allowed him to push beyond what most vaulters were doing."

And push he did. Erik earned two U.S. National Gold Men's Championships and was the U.S. National Pas Deux (mixed pairs) Champion twice. No stranger at international competitions he competed at the 1998 WEGs in Rome and the 2000 World Vaulting Championships in Mannheim Germany. But the 2002 WEGs in Jerez, Spain, must stand out as extra special; it marked the first time he was able to take his partner, "Doc", an 18.1 hh Belgian gelding, to an international level event. "Doc" also has the distinction of being the first draft horse to compete at the WEGs.

on the executive board of the AVA. Martonovich, along with her husband Yossi, whose backgrounds are as dressage trainers, started a vaulting club in the early 1990s called the Golden Gate Vaulters as a venue for their teenage son, Erik, to train and

compete.

"Kids love horses," said Susan Barron, founder, mentor and coach of the Sky Vaulters based in Surrey, British Columbia. "Vaulting is a really nice way to get children involved with horses that doesn't cost an arm and a

leg. It is such an affordable sport; we can use one horse for lots of kids. They get to be around horses and do something unique. Why just sit?"

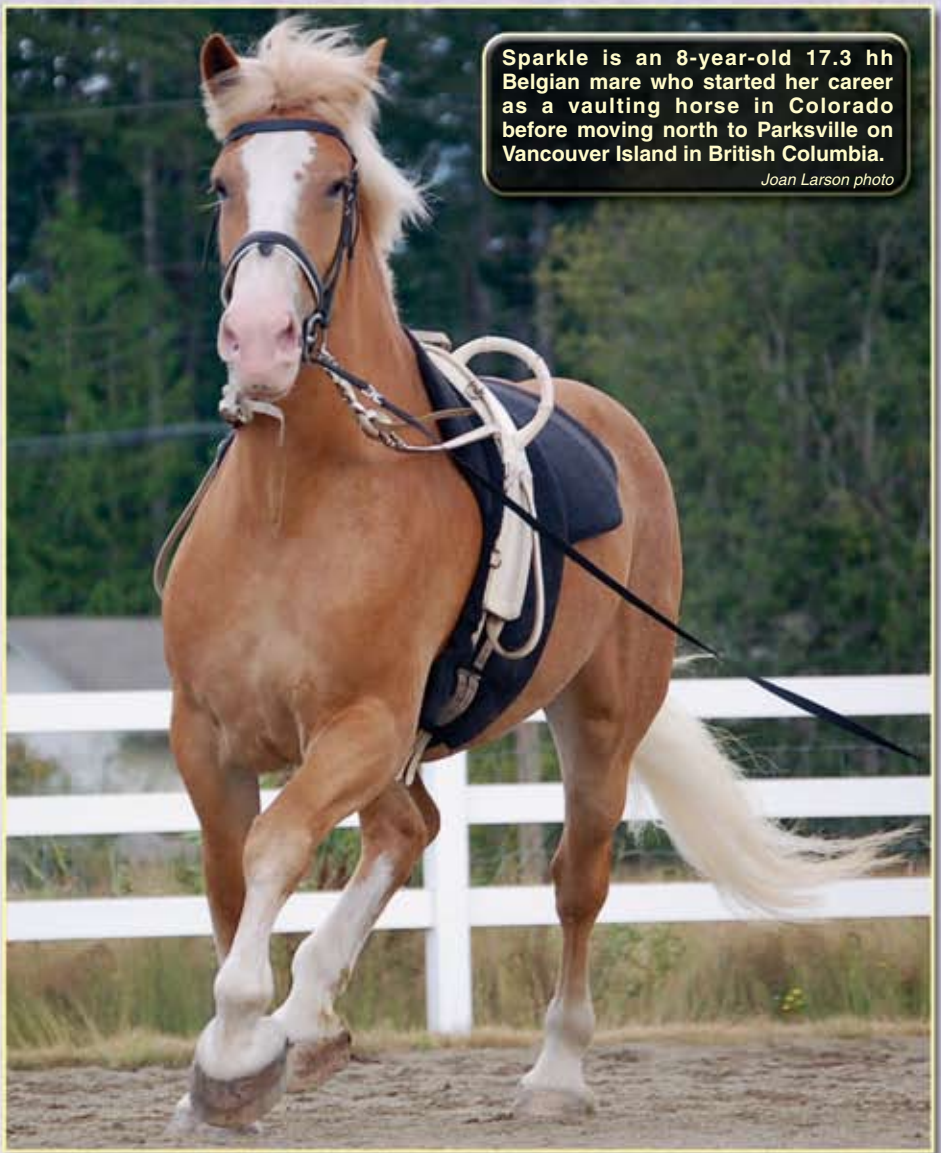
"A wonderful part of the sport is the sharing of horses at competitions," says Debbie Bentzen, coach of the Mt. Arrowsmith Vaulters in Parksville, British Columbia. "There is no other sport where you can arrive at a show and ask for help if you



Demonstrations are an important way of introducing new people to the world of vaulting. It also shows that horses can come from other disciplines. Tiny previously was an eventer. *Joan Larson photo*



There is lots of room on Tiny's back for multiple vaulters. Here, the 16.3 hh Clydesdale/Quarter Horse-cross goes about his business while Nicole Balance, Jess Bentzen and Danielle Adams of the Mt. Arrowsmith Vaulters perform a team move. *Joan Larson photo*



Sparkle is an 8-year-old 17.3 hh Belgian mare who started her career as a vaulting horse in Colorado before moving north to Parksville on Vancouver Island in British Columbia. *Joan Larson photo*

have a lame horse, or are otherwise in need, and find a substitute horse offered willingly."

Competitive vaulting has three divisions, walk, trot and canter. Within each division there are levels. Unlike so many sports, age is not a determining factor and competitors advance as their abilities increase. Vaulters have to compete in two phases, the compulsory exercises (the mount, basic seat, flag, mill, scissors, stand and flank) followed by a free-style (Kur) program, scores from each phase are then added together. The vaulter may compete individually, in pairs and as part of a whole team. It is an amazing sight to see three vaulters, together, on the back of one horse.

#### **A Horse of Course**

"First we learn about the horse," said Barron. "The horse is a very important part of the sport. The horse

is not a balance beam, a gymnastics tool, the horse has feelings and you have to be kind to the horse."

The horse of choice for Barron and her club are draft crosses, preferably a Percheron cross. They meet her criteria of mind, body and temperament. "They have to be able to tolerate everyone being on them, getting up, moving around and not many horses will put up with that," admits Barron. "They are very giving and easy to work with." She considers their flashy color an added bonus.

For Martonovich, used to dealing with Thoroughbreds, the introduction to a purebred Belgian mare in the mid-1990s was quite a switch. "She was so terrific that we have stuck with the breed and have had continued good luck with them," Martonovich says. "They are very athletic, can canter well, and are level-headed, kind and beautiful, all the ingredients to

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Free time and a change of scenery are very important to the well-being of all vaulting horses. Young girls and horses, it is a perfect fit.

Bretta Deluca photo

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make a great vaulting horse."

In 2006, the Mt. Arrowsmith Vaulters purchased Sparkles, a registered Belgian, from the Martonovichs. Bentzen feels there are some great vaulting horses coming out of the Golden, Colorado, program. The attractive mare with her long, flowing blonde tail is proving to be a welcome addition to the club, joining forces with Tiny, a Clydesdale cross. "Both horses are safe and very trustworthy, even with our youngest vaulters," states Bentzen.

Tack for a vaulting horse is standardized, a snaffle bridle with a dropped or regular noseband, side reins, a special vaulting surcingle with hand holds and loops which

sit on top of a thick pad. Since children are involved, vaulting horses get pampered and groomed to a mirror-like finish, manes and tails are braided for a polished, professional turnout. Glitter is optional.

When watching, it quickly becomes obvious the beneficial training tool vaulting is for developing an independent seat for any riding endeavor. At the 2007 B.C. Provincial Vaulting Championships a vaulter from the Warm Beach Vaulters, of Stanwood, Washington, shows flexibility and control as she performs on the team's Belgian, Praise.

Janice Reiter photo



Vaulting horses come in all shapes and sizes, anywhere from ponies to warmbloods and drafts easily topping 17 hh. Cadence and dependability are paramount as the horse travels on a long line, controlled by a longeur, in a counter-clockwise 15 meter, or greater, circle.

### **Southern Horsepitality**

When the world arrives at the Kentucky Horse Park in 2010 it is a sure bet all eyes will be transfixed by the breathtaking excitement and artistry of vaulting. Martonovich is hoping the exposure will generate a growing interest here at home. "It is a wonderful sport and we have our draft horses to support it."

### **Get a Leg Up**

Intrigued? Want to find out more? Presently the American Vaulting Association (AVA) has over 100 clubs and affiliates stretching from coast to coast, plus Hawaii. So no matter where you live there is bound to be someone close by to help you get started. Contact the AVA at: [www.americanvaulting.org](http://www.americanvaulting.org).

For those vaulting wannabes living north of the border be sure and check out Vault Canada at: [www.vaultcanada.org](http://www.vaultcanada.org).

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