strength, suppleness, stretch and balance. If you can stand up on a cantering horse, you can probably do anything much. And what the audience doesn’t see is the effort it takes for vaulters to get to the AVA Silver Medal level that is a requirement for application to the FVT.

Each spring the invitation goes out to all the AVA members with at least an AVA Silver Medal. The invitation states that the purpose of the FVT is to: 1) promote the sport of vaulting in the United States, 2) reward vaulters who have sacrificed other sports and other activities to progress to this level, and 3) have an ‘on call’ group for special exhibitions. They have fulfilled these goals admirably for 15 years.

Ambassadors for Vaulting

What’s the secret? There must be something that has kept this intangible positive energy so strong over the last 15 years—starting with the coaching, the attitude, the presentation. Lucinda Faulkner, one of FVT’s original coaches, says that the off-the-horse part is just as important as the actual performance. “One of the things I coach them on is presentation at all times,” she explains. “The vaulters might be on-site at each event for up to 10 hours a day, so we practice answers to questions people might ask or comments they might make. For example, I never thought thank you was enough when someone went out of their way to compliment them. I made them practice something like ‘Thank you, so much. We’re glad you enjoyed it, we certainly had a good time performing.’ We talked about how for many spectators, especially the youth, it took courage to approach the vaulters, and that courage should be rewarded. The vaulters were always to seem approachable - never in their own clique, unaware of the public.” Not a bad approach to life!

She continues “We needed everything to be safe and things to work, every time; we wanted everyone on the Friendship Team to get to feel like they played an important role, to feel like they shone at something.” Every vaulter who has participated with the FVT knows it takes them to try and do what they do. They definitely shine.

These exciting young vaulters are the ultimate ambassadors for the sport. It’s obvious that they’re having the time of their lives and that their enthusiasm has been instrumental to the growth of the sport. The name says everything. There’s only one position in Friendship and Team. Together Everyone Accomplishes More! It doesn’t get any better than that.

About the Author: Carole Dwinell is a long-time AVA member and horse enthusiast who has successfully fielded a California vaulting club and now urges on her horse making art and writing articles for popular equestrian websites like discoveryhorses.com. She is also a tireless volunteer who continues to spread the vaulting word at every chance she can! You can contact her at horse123@aol.com.

FRIENDSHIP TEAM 2010 Wows WEG Crowd

Six horses, six lungers, two coaches, 36 equestrian vaulters, along with assorted cheerleaders and lively AVA Friendship Teammaster Priscilla Faulkner descending on the prestigious World Equestrian Games in October to perform a series of eight vaulting demonstrations, both at the site of WEG, Lexington’s Kentucky Horse Park, as well as at the International Equestrian Festival, a celebration in downtown Lexington that offered more than 120 hours of horse demonstrations and equestrian celebrities. The 2010 Friendship Team vaulters came from 11 different states, encompassed all six of the AVA regions, and an AVA Silver Medal level vaulters or above (with the exception of the flies). The contingent was led with a firm hand and a warm heart by Mrs. Priscilla S. Faulkner, who had a total 15 years ago to bring together vaulters from clubs across the United States to showcase vaulting at important events throughout America. The WEG performances featured AVA horses Colonel Mustard (owned and lunged by Michelle Soleranz), Chocal (owned by Sydney Franklin and lunged by Priscilla B. Faulkner), Gumby (owned by Priscilla B. Faulkner and lunged by Rosanna Lamb), Gustauff (owned by Frank Pace and lunged by Tom Petsch), Louontos (owned by Michelle Soleranz and lunged by David White), and Prophet (owned and lunged by Patti Skipton).

Our 2010 Friendship Vaulting Team, chosen for not only their vaulting level but also for their commitment as an ambassador for our sport as well, was composed of Delaney Alman (Orangevale, CA), Lindsey Anderson (Moreno, CA), Ryan Barbier (Redwood, WA), Mikalah Bowman (Eatontown, NJ), Donna Drieda (Redwood City, CA), Anna Erickson (Cameron Island, WI), Ashley Espada (Rossville, CA), Jerry Gadd (Sanatoga, CA), Rob Faulkner (Lancaster, CA), Malia Finney (Lancaster, CA), Eric Garcia (Novato, CA), Elle Gifford (Woodside, CA), Randon Gondinh (Wilton, CA), Pagan-Green Salam (Hinckley, CA), Shannon Hoke (Petaluma, CA), Sherry Janes (Stanwood, WA), Laura Jassowski (B El Dorado, CA), Alexandrea Karter (Jones (Lexington, VA), Jacqueline Labelle (Northport, CA), Rosanna Mitchell (Redwood, WI), Katrusa Noble (Woodside, CA), Julia Overton (Stanwood, WA), Kiele Patterson (Standwood, WA), Miranda Prins (Orangevale, CA), Emily Reed (Henderson, NV), Danielle Ryerson (Canyon Island, WA), Ken Schwab (Vulcanaca, WA), Matthew Sheperd (Twin Park, WI), Gina Snyder (Kardon Crest, WA), Bob Soleranz (Citrus Heights, CA), Kristal Soleranz (Citrus Heights, CA), Leticia Soleranz (Citrus Heights, CA), Anna Brook Thomas (Redwood, WA), Cal Thompson (Rochelle, TN), and Jamie Wanstall (Standwood, WA).

Thanks to the entire AVA Friendship Vaulting Team— including not just our vaulters but our coaches, horses, lungers, cheerleaders, schedulers, cooks, grooms, financial patrons and event masterminds—for being such wonderful ambassadors for our sport at the World Equestrian Games 2010, and throughout the decades!

Note: If you’re interested in becoming part of the 2011 AVA Friendship Vaulting Team, all AVA Silver Medal vaulters automatically receive an invitation each year to participate, and must complete the Friendship Vaulting Team application and return it to be considered.

FACE THE WORLD

“FACE is a group of inspired individuals from all over the country who come together to vault and compete at the elite level with hopes of conquering the world. And they did just that!”

O n the final day of the World Equestrian Games 2010, in Lexington, Kentucky, the seven members of Free Artists Creative Equestrians (FACE) along with horse Palatine and lunger Carolyn Bland made vaulting history by winning the Team Vaulting gold medal at the most prestigious international equestrian event in the world, often times referred to as “the Equestrian Olympics.” Edging out Team Germany by just 19 thousandths of a point, FACE proved to the world (and thousands of curious Kentuckians onlookers) that vaulting is finally, after decades of European domination, an American sport too.

But FACE’s golden performance in Kentucky was hardly an anomaly for this internationally successful club. FACE began to push the envelope at the 2002 World Equestrian Games, where they famously performed their routine to a single piece of powerful music. In 2006, FAME (Free Artists Mount Eden, a composite team consisting of FACE and Mt. Eden Vaulting Club members) changed the game again with a freestyle focused on innovative dance, intricate choreography, harmony with the horse, and interpersonal theatrical chemistry. Despite de-emphasizing high-flying triples, FACE famously clinched the silver medal, missing the gold by just thousands of a point. Then in 2008, FACE The Dark Side of the Moon earned the bronze medal at the World Championships in Brno, Czech Republic.
A Creative Vision
FACE’s storied medal-winning performances all began with a dream from Devon Maitozo’s father, Mathew Maitozo. A music and voice teacher, Matt envisioned a non-profit organization dedicated to empowering talented children to learn and perform together musically—Free Artists Creative Enterprises. Matt succumbed to illness and passed away without realizing his dream, but Devon, Blake Dahlgren and Devon Maitozo—a tribute to his father’s passion for artistic theater and his own passion for performance—created FACE, an organization dedicated to empowering talented children to learn and perform together. "Music is an integral part of what inspires our craft," Devon says. "A simple change from ‘Enterprises’ to ‘Equestrians’ and I felt it was making a bridge between my father’s dreams and my own. It felt right. It makes me proud every time I think about it!"

And so the legacy was born—a legacy in which performance, artistic development, creativity, and passion for the sport of vaulting have inspired FACE vaulters to push the envelope of what is possible and what is expected of a team freestyle both in this country and beyond.

Not Your Average Vaulting Club
FACE functions differently from most vaulting clubs. The majority of the club’s time, money, and effort balloons around World Championship years, with little or no team activity happening in between. Although some FACEs (as they’re called) remain loyal and dedicated to the club during non-Championship years, many return to their home clubs to compete individually or even take the year off from vaulting altogether. "I don’t see FACE as a vaulting club in the classic sense," says Craig Coburn, FEI “T” Judge and the Chef d’Equipe at this year’s World Equestrian Games. "FACE is a group of inspired individuals from all over the country who come together to vault and compete at the elite level with hopes of conquering the world. And they did just that!"

"Most clubs are in the business of vaulting for the ‘whole experience from tiny-tots to elite’,” says Emma Seely, co-coach of the WEG 2006 silver winning FAME team and long-time head coach at Mt. Eden Vaulting Club. "FACE thrives all their efforts at creating the greatest thing the world has seen. They almost always succeed at that, but they have no time leftover for the other things in vaulting."

Traveling Hither and Thither
Unlike your traditional vaulting club, FACEs come from all over the country—from San Diego to New Jersey, from Boston to Santa Cruz, traveling to weekend team training clinics in Woodside, California as often as possible. Some team members, including Mary Garrett, Devon Maitozo, and even FACE’s equestrian partner in crime, Palestine, picked up camp and moved from southern to northern California to facilitate easier training sessions. "I moved from my home," recalls Mary. "I left all of my friends and family behind and started fresh in a new school and a new life with my team.”

Anne-Valérie VanVranken, a recent high school graduate, deferred her first semester at Wells College to train for the World Equestrian Games. "While I was training myself in New Jersey last fall, I realized the team was where my heart was,” Anne-Valérie notes. "I knew I’d have to defer my first semester of college, but winning the gold medal made it all worth it.”

For the Love of Performance
There is something special about FACE that inspires its vaulters to make amazing sacrifices. Whether it’s traveling from East Coast to West Coast on a bi-monthly basis, moving to an altogether new home, or investing time, money, and resources at the expense of all other hobbies, the opportunity to create and perform art on horseback keeps its members coming back time and time again. Or perhaps there’s also a little bit of a competitive nature in each and every FACE that keeps them coming back for more.

"I came back to FACE for one reason,” says Mari Inouye, vaulting veteran and member of the bronze medal-winning 2008 FACE team. "I wanted to win gold in our home country!”

Mary Garrett, a newbie to the international scene, had a bit of a different outlook on vaulting with FACE. "I knew I wanted to be on this team since I saw FAME’s performance at Nationals in 2006: I witnessed the power and control they had over the audience and how their beautiful, innovative style was going to change the sport as we knew it,” she says. "I wanted to be surrounded by the abundance of talent that was coming from every pore of this team.”

The Long Road
Oozing talent and competitive nature aside, creating the world’s best freestyle takes thousands of man-hours. Whenever a new FACE vaulting season begins, the team spends much of the early fall exploring their potential through improvisation and meticulous effort. A favorite creative activity at FACE practices is the improvisational warm-up. While Devon blasts a favorite track or album through his speaker system, team members take turns leading the group through an improvised dance routine incorporating balance, stretch, and movement. Pre-practice warm-ups look a lot more like a modern dance troupe than a regimented gymnastics class. Practices throughout the season are all geared toward creating the perfect freestyle, but as Devon says, "it is typical sometimes it takes an army to fix bad habits."
Although FACE’s training emphasizes its athletes’ development of artistic expression, training is coupled with an intense work ethic that is geared toward creating strong, flexible vaulters capable of exploring their creativity with precision and confidence.

The 2010 Season

For FACE, this past year unfolded much like the previous few. With eyes and hearts set on the gold medal, things really started coming together when Devon showed up to practice one day with a piece from Prokofiev’s Romeo and Juliet. After listening to the music, the team unanimously agreed that it was “the one” and they began constructing a more concrete version of the freestyle they would eventually perform at the US Selection Trials and the World Equestrian Games.

“I take on the music as a very personal project of my own,” says Devon. Not only did Devon find and edit the piece for the four-minute freestyle, but he also composed about a quarter of the team’s freestyle music himself on his computer. “Garage Band has really helped me streamline my creative process musically,” he says. The team took a loose reading of Romeo and Juliet in choreographing their freestyle, focusing primarily on the romantic tragedy of the two star-crossed lovers. Devon, drama-king extraordinaire, was Romeo. Rosalind was Juliet. “I don’t think I was so much ‘chosen’ to be Juliet, as it seemed the natural thing” Rosalind says. “Devon and I just feel comfortable on the horse together. I never have to think twice about whether or not he is holding me, which gives me the freedom to indulge in the performance.”

Unlike previous years, this FACE team stuck to the same freestyle structure through all four selection trials and the World Championships. The typical FACE freestyle tends to arrive at competitions in drafts, each very different from the previous in both structure and content until ultimately, usually in time for a World Championship, the freestyle is in its most perfect form. This year, FACE seemed to get it right the first time, making only subtle choreographic changes and adding difficulty throughout the season. This gave them the confidence to perform and peak at the most important competition of the year—the World Equestrian Games.

Winning It All

After training for a month together in Tennessee, the team felt prepared for the Games. With a few added tricks up their sleeve, a perfectly choreographed routine, and stellar compulsions, the team finally began to taste just how close they were to that gold medal. The competition, however, didn’t go entirely according to plan.

Everyone loves to talk about the unique power of a FACE freestyle, but let’s not forget that this team also won the compulsory round at this year’s (and 2006’s) World Equestrian Games—and by a huge margin of more than two tenths of a point at that. With a lead over the competition (mainly Germany and Austria), FACE felt ready and confident to show the world their freestyle.

But when it came time for Round I freestyle, something was amiss. Forced to warm up in an arena adjacent to the driving horses due to inadequate warm-up space closer to the vaulting arenas, Palatine had been spooked by the commotion of cantering and never quite calmed down. FACE’s warm-up was marred with falls, and everyone was on edge before they entered the competition arena for their freestyle performance.

“I was trying to think calm thoughts for Pal,” says Emily Hogye, FACE’s highest-flying team member. “Of course, I was also thinking about what would or wouldn’t be possible if our horse wasn’t going perfectly.”

That first round freestyle started off cautiously and slowly, with each and every FACE trying to help ease Palatine into the mayhem of a World Equestrian Games environment he had never before experienced. As the freestyle wore on, things started to flow more smoothly and Palatine seemed to relax into the freestyle with his teammates. Then suddenly, during the team’s highest flying, most challenging part of the freestyle, Palatine caught a glimpse of the TV camera following him around the circle and cut into the circle just enough to knock all three athletes to the ground.

No one was injured, but it was surely a kick to the team’s confidence. After that round, FACE moved from first place to third. Only the most perfect of performances, combined with mistakes from both Team Germany and Team Austria, would allow FACE to win the gold medal they coveted so badly.

The stars seemed to be aligned for FACE on October 10th, the final round of team competition. Despite feeling crushed from their first freestyle performance, the team jointly agreed that they no longer cared which medal they wore around their neck at the end of the day, so long as they gave Kentucky the performance of a lifetime.

Lunger Carolyn Bland emphasized a calm warm-up for Palatine and did everything in her ability to keep him focused and happy. Clad with cotton ball earplugs and a hat, Palatine felt less affected by the audience’s cheers. The team lined up in front of the moving camera, blocking the bow is an important part of FACE’s performance.