

# FACE THE WORLD

By Megan Benjamin

*"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!"*

On 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 lungeur Carolyn Bland made vaulting history by winning the Team Vaulting gold medal at the most prestigious international equestrian event in the world, oftentimes 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 Kentucky onlookers) that vaulting is finally, after decades of European domination, an American team 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, FAME famously clinched the silver medal, missing the gold by just thousandths 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



Photo Courtesy of Lynne Owen Photography

with an edgy freestyle set to the music of Pink Floyd. Winning three medals in four World Championships, FACE is certainly a powerhouse of international American vaulting.

### 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 understood that his father's dreams of musical theater and his own passion for performance on horseback were very much in synch. As a tribute to his father's passion for artistic



Sometimes it takes an army to fix bad habits.

education of young people and performance through music, Devon continued his father's legacy with his own innate passions for performance through vaulting.

"Music is an integral part of what inspires our craft," Devon says. "A simple change from 'Enterprises' to 'Equestrians' and I felt I 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 FACErs (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 "I" judge and the Chef d'Équipe 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 throws all their efforts at creating the greatest thing the world has seen yet. 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, FACErs 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, Palatine, 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."

Annalise VanVranken, a recent high school graduate, deferred her first semester at Wells College to train for the World Equestrian Games.

"While I was training by myself in New Jersey last fall, I realized the team was where my heart was," Annalise 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 FACEr that keeps them coming back for more.

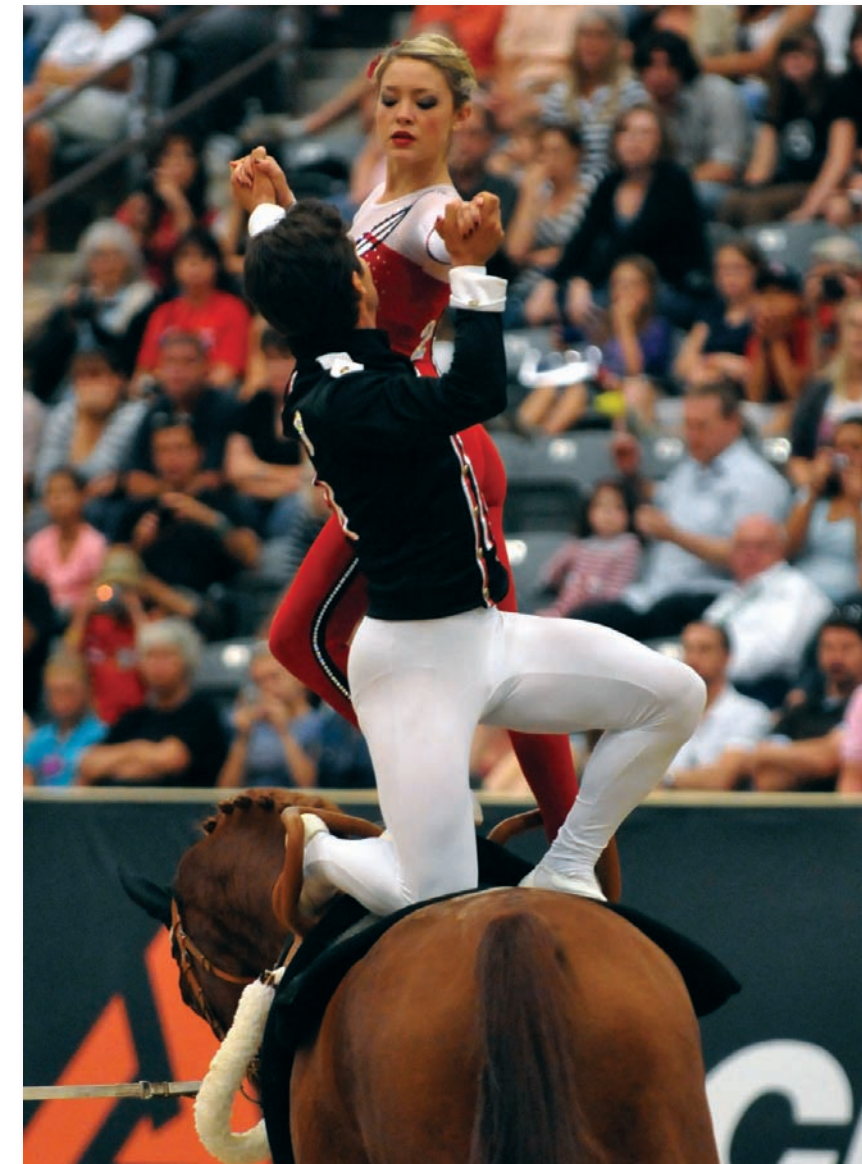
"I came back to FACE for one reason," says Mari Inouye, vaulting veteran and member of the bronze medal-winning 2008 FACE team. "I wanted to win gold in our home country!"

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 oozing 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



The story of Romeo and Juliet added an extra touch of drama to this year's FACE freestyle.

## FACE THROUGH THE YEARS

### 2002: Fifth Place

2002 World Equestrian Games  
Jerez, Spain

FACE with Czar Ivan and Ulla Dietz

Still in the days of nine-member teams and five-minute freestyles, FACE famously vaulted to a seamless piece of music by Bond. For the first time ever, the team freestyle became about the music and the performance, not just about the moves themselves.

**Team Members:** Jackelyn Adkins, Blake Dahlgren, Bethany Haas, Adrian Matsumoto, Shannyn Poer, Leah Smith, Tricia Thompson (Dahlgren), Rachel Torrez, and Sterling Weatherly



### 2004

2004 Vaulting World Championships  
Stadl Paura, Austria

Due to a now defunct rule that all team members must be 18 or younger to compete internationally, FACE chose not to assemble a team of inexperienced competitors and instead sent two individuals to the World Championships, Blake Dahlgren and Devon Maitozo. Coastline Vaulters (along with current FACE member Rosalind Ross) represented Team USA and brought home the bronze medal.

### 2006: The Silver Medal

2006 World Equestrian Games  
Aachen, Germany  
FAME (Free Artists Mt. Eden) with Grand Gaudino and Dr. Silke Bartel

In an attempt to create the best team the world had ever seen, FACE and Mt. Eden Vaulting Club combined under coaches Devon Maitozo and Emma Seely to form FAME. Working with music by composer Johannes Brahms in addition to beats partially composed by Devon, FAME earned the highest scores in the world with their dramatic and intricately choreographed freestyle.

**Team Members:** Megan Benjamin, Blake Dahlgren, Elizabeth Ioannou, Devon Maitozo, Katie Richie, Rosalind Ross, and Annalise VanVranken



### 2008: The Bronze Medal

2008 Vaulting World Championships  
Brno, Czech Republic

FACE Dark Side of the Moon with Leonardo and Lasse Kristensen

Performing to music from Pink Floyd's Dark Side of the Moon album, FACE showed a different kind of performance. Embodying Pink Floyd's musical continuity, FACE vaulted to pieces of every song in the album but one. At the World Championships, FACE finished first in the compulsory round, but due to a fall in the first round freestyle and a strong showing by Germany and Austria, FACE ended with the bronze medal instead of the elusive gold.

**Team Members:** Megan Benjamin, Emily Hogye, Mari Inouye, Devon Maitozo, Elizabeth Osborne, Rosalind Ross, and Annalise VanVranken



### 2010: The Gold Medal

2010 World Equestrian Games  
Lexington, Kentucky USA

FACE with Palatine and Carolyn Bland

They did it! Performing to Prokofiev's Romeo and Juliet and reverting back to the romantic choreography and intricate composition reminiscent of FAME, FACE gave Kentucky the performance of a lifetime. Despite a fall in the first round of freestyle, FACE proved that they were the best team in the world.

**Team Members:** Blake Dahlgren, Mary Garrett, Emily Hogye, Mari Inouye, Devon Maitozo, Rosalind Ross, and Annalise VanVranken



for little to be typical about any particular FACE training session."

The one constant in nearly every FACE training session, however, is the sheer number of hours FACERs spend together on the barrel. Inspired primarily by modern dance videos and old material from previous years, they try things over and over again, tweaking and finessing the

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mechanics and choreography repeatedly to try to make each move, each transition, and each moment perfect.

"With Devon's vision for the freestyle leading the way, and everyone else adding ideas here and there, the freestyle almost has a life of its own," says Anna de la Motte, co-coach of the 2010 FACE team. "The vast amount of creative brain power that went into the freestyle throughout this past year is mind-boggling!"

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. Whether it's running the Woodside trails, improv dancing in the studio, training in the gym, conditioning at practice, meditating, mental training, or practicing thousands upon thousands of compulsory drills, FACE vaulters are more than fit enough to experiment with new and daring freestyle exercises with their horse.

### 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



FACE had several tricks up their sleeve, but they never performed this high flying flip in competition.

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 compulsories, 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 2008'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 carriages 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 Paly," 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 FACER 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

insecure triple, 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

it from Palatine's vision. Annalise VanVranken raised her hand for the music, it started, and from there, the audience indulged in the purest of theater, art, dance, and performance on horseback. Each moment felt suspended in time, fluid and perfect.

Although the team never performed several of the tricks they had up their sleeves (including a huge front flip, pictured), it didn't matter. The judges awarded FACE for their brilliant performance with soaring scores and a German fall and many Austrian "touch grounds" assured the team's position at the top of the world.

"Standing on the podium with a gold medal was something I had always dreamed about. After winning silver at WEG in 2006, I was unsure I would ever get this chance again," says Blake Dahlgren, the team's "compulsory expert." "I'm very proud of our efforts and thankful I was able to make a contribution."

"Performing to sold-out crowds in the Alltech Arena, FACE and this year's World Equestrian Games proved that vaulting is interesting to the general public and that we must be



Annalise and Rosalind, beaming with happiness, while their FACE teammates focus on an interview.

responsible for continually trying to reach them," says Craig Coburn.

FACE has brought American vaulting into the lives of thousands. Now it's our responsibility to bring American vaulting, from tiny tots to elite, into the lives of thousands more.

**About the Author:** Megan Benjamin is a recent Cornell University graduate. A Mt. Eden Vaulting Club member, she is the 2006 World Equestrian Games Women's Vaulting Champion, and a member of the AVA Board of Directors.



Even the bow is an important part of FACE's performance.