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Horsing Around in Michigan

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When my daughter was a toddler, my parents would often take her to feed carrots to their neighbor's horses. At three years old, she started taking riding lessons. Now, at six years old, she is an "equine vaulter." For those of you who do not know, equine vaulting is gymnastics on the back of a cantering horse. Gymnastics is already a risky sport, but to combine it with horses? Horses are large, powerful, and unpredictable; characteristics that make horses inherently risky on their own. I admit that I was hesitant to allow her to participate. And, being an attorney, I asked myself, "How does the law deal with the liability associated with horses?"

Michigan is one of about 44 states that have enacted an Equine Activity Liability Act (EALA). Michigan's EALA provides that equine professionals are not liable for injury, damage, or death arising out of one's participation in horse-related activities. Such activities include, but are not limited to, horseback riding, grooming, equine vaulting, and even feeding carrots to the neighbor's horses. There are some exceptions, however. Equine professionals must post warning signs, must provide good tack, and must make reasonable and prudent efforts to determine the ability of the participant to safely engage in the equine-activity. Another big exception is that an equine professional could be found liable if he or she commits a negligent act or omission that is the proximate cause of injury, damage, or death.

As for equine vaulting, it is the safest of all equine sports—after all, the horse is on a lunge line and always under the control of the lunger. According to the American Vaulting Association (AVA), "Vaulting is not only the safest of the equestrian sports, it is documented safer than riding bicycles, playing on playground equipment, and even playing soccer." The AVA has very stringent reporting guidelines for its member clubs and there have been no reported concussions or deaths from vaulting for over 30 years (AVA Injury Summary Reports).

As for my daughter, she is hooked; she loves vaulting. As for me, well, I admit there are times when I either close my eyes or hold my breath when my daughter is vaulting. But I am also now a huge fan of this breathtaking and spectacular sport. My daughter participates with A Vaulting Connection located at Legacy Stables through Therapeutic Horse Connection, a Michigan non-profit. If you are interested in learning more, visit www.karinshorses.com.

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