

## Trapeze students flying high for dreams

### These weekend athletes may not all float with the greatest of ease, but a Chicago school for fliers has them soaring to new heights

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By Gayle Worland, Tribune staff reporter.

Sarah Farber and Laura DeGood will scamper up a 22-foot ladder this week in a Lake Forest park, grab a trapeze bar and thrust their backs into an arc. And they will fly.

Legs outstretched, ponytails airborne, they'll skim the air with toes pointed, kicking up, out, back. On the opposite side of the ring, a bulky-armed catcher will sway upside down on another trapeze. If their momentum is right, flier and catcher will make perfect contact and glide hand in hand for a fleeting moment, like a human pendulum on a clock, before returning the safety of a platform or net.

The two teenagers and their catcher are among some 60 students in a trapeze school that through the summer will convert a grassy field in three lakefront parks into a one-ring aerial spectacle for passersby. It's perhaps fitting that the outdoor stunts begin soon after the official start of summer, when the sun soars to its highest point in the sky.

"When you're outside and there's no roof, you feel more like you're really flying," said Farber, 15. "It feels like you could keep going forever, and then gravity pulls you back."

Most of these fliers are not professional acrobats, but brave weekend athletes--doctors, lawyers, real estate agents, schoolchildren--willing to dangle and swoop with varying levels of grace more than 16 feet off the ground.

This is the second year the Flying Gaonas Gym, Chicago's only flying trapeze school, will display such feats in three outdoor locations: Deer Community Park (Tuesday to July 18), Lincoln Park in Chicago (July 24 to Aug. 9) and Indian Hill Park in Winnetka (Sept. 7 to 24).

Children and adults can try a swing for \$10. Spectators may ogle the [advanced](#) classes on Wednesdays, Saturdays and Sundays and find other sessions posted at [www.flyinggaonasymp.com](http://www.flyinggaonasymp.com).

Most of the year, the trapeze students practice in the Broadway Armory on Chicago's North Side below caged lights. But in summer, their Big Top is the sky--a beautiful thought, until you consider the extra challenges trapeze artists face outside: winds that blow them slightly off course, focal points that change, the glare of the sun or the discomfort of a light rain.

Then again, this is show biz. Flair and humility are part of the act, in the way that any artistic athlete--an ice dancer, platform diver, freestyle skier--tries to make a daring act look effortless.

"It's our job to make it look [easy](#)," said DeGood, 17, who has been flying for a year.

That takes work, a minimum of two hours a day in intensive tumbling and static trapeze moves for both her and Farber.

Peers of the teens probably would rather spend a summer afternoon at the beach or the mall. But in dreams that might seem as quaint as a painted circus train chugging its way across the American frontier, Farber and DeGood envision a different life: one spent high above the trapeze nets and sawdust floors of a traveling circus.

Both girls are "townies"--not born into a circus family with generations of skilled acrobats. Both attend schools on the North Shore.

And both know they must toil to catch up because, at the ripe old ages of 15 and 17, they have a lot to learn.

"They're overcoming all the obstacles," said Gloria Gaona, co-owner of the Flying Gaonas Gym with her husband, Julio, the girls' trapeze coach. The couple, now in their 30s, began performing in circuses as preschoolers.

"In show [business](#), if you're an outsider coming in ... you have to work harder," she said.

In professional circus [performances](#), which Farber and DeGood try to attend at least 20 times a year, the teens find an allure they can't quite explain. They proudly display the hardened flesh on their palms, where a metal bar wrapped in gauze and tape has ripped the skin and left calluses.

During the school year, they bring their homework to the gym to complete between workouts. They have given up just about every other activity, save an occasional baby-sitting job, to train for airborne stunts such as the splits or a hip pullover.

"Just being in the circus is your sustenance," said Farber, an incoming junior at Niles North High School in Skokie.

This summer, DeGood will try to duplicate her proudest achievement: "catching a double." She reached that milestone last month by spinning two somersaults in the air and landing in the outreached grip of the catcher.

Her trapeze cohorts put a crown on her head and made her queen for the day.

DeGood moved to the Chicago area at age 10 with her mother, a ballerina-turned-schoolteacher. The move changed DeGood from a gymnastics enthusiast into a sullen couch potato, until her mother signed her up for circus classes at Actors Gymnasium in Evanston.

Today, kicking off her Birkenstocks, DeGood earnestly explains the "rig," the collection of fly bars, safety ropes and net that has become her stage. This fall the senior at New Trier High School in Winnetka plans to audition for a circus school in Montreal.

She has become fast friends with Farber, once a chubby girl with glasses, now limber and lean. Farber began taking trapeze lessons in 2001 with her mom, 54, a grandmother of six.

Her parents insist that she attend college before pursuing her "ultimate fantasy"--traveling across Europe by train as part of a one-ring circus, elephants and all.

"In Europe, people think of circus as an art form," she said.

Working for the Gaonas, both girls have helped novice fliers, ages 2 to 83, take their first leap off the platform with the bar in hand. DeGood instructs them in form: chest up, hips in, lean forward--then fly.

"The way I was taught is, 'Be like the lady'" on the bow of a pirate ship, DeGood said. "Or sometimes I tell them, Like in 'Titanic'--'King of the World!'"

