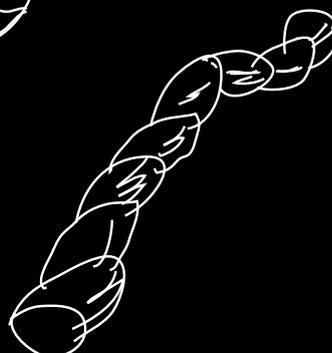
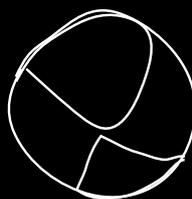
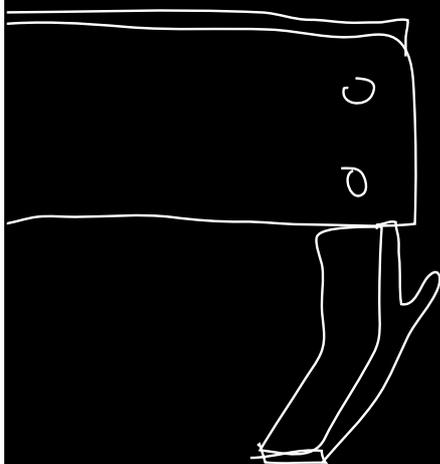


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# blind circus

— benefits of circus arts for  
people with impaired vision



**CIRQUEON**

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## blind circus

### introduction

The use of circus arts in work with people with impaired vision is founded in the concept of social circus which is a professional, globally recognized educational approach which utilizes circus arts for social intervention. As a universal educational approach, social circus can be effectively applied and adapted to a broad range of target groups with various needs and abilities. The goal of social circus is to develop the clients' physical potential as well as their emotional and social skills.

Internationally, the application of social circus to work with people with various disabilities is usually referred to as *Handicirque*. This approach was pioneered by the Belgian Ecole de Cirque Bruxelles circus school after this institution had been approached by an organization working with hearing-impaired clients. The request was to find new activities to boost the self confidence of the clients and to offer them the opportunity to experience the feeling of success in an energetic environment while realizing their creative potential. The pilot project was a success and convinced other organizations to involve their clients in *Handicirque* programs. In 2009, the program organized by the original Brussels-based circus school involved 200 participants<sup>1</sup> and was no longer limited to clients with impaired hearing; it had reached out to clients with various other disabilities thereby fulfilling the diversity evoked by the term *Handicirque*.

At CIRQUEON, the idea to create a program offering circus arts to people with impaired vision was conceived after a positive experience with a chance involvement of a participant with impaired vision in a circus course organized by CIRQUEON at the Bohnice Psychiatric Hospital.

The goal of this document is to present circus arts as a suitable activity for people with impaired vision, an activity capable of reflecting their needs and positively influencing their personal development.

## blind circus

Circus arts include many techniques which can contribute to the development of various skills and abilities – physical, social and emotional. Blind Circus has created a concept of these techniques which reflects the limits of people with impaired vision and reacts to their potential. The training of these circus techniques can represent an effective motivational basis for learning

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<sup>1</sup> *HANDICIRQUE: Circus with mentally and physically challenged students* [online]. Brussels, 2009[quoted 2013-03-25]. Available at: [http://www.caravancircusnetwork.eu/assets/images/Caravan%20network/Publications/Bruxelles\\_HANDICIRQUE%20or%20Circus%20with%20mentally%20and%20physically%20challenged%20students.pdf](http://www.caravancircusnetwork.eu/assets/images/Caravan%20network/Publications/Bruxelles_HANDICIRQUE%20or%20Circus%20with%20mentally%20and%20physically%20challenged%20students.pdf)

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concrete skills and abilities which people with impaired vision can use in their daily life. The Blind Circus project reflects the current trends in special education which emphasizes the need for specialized physical-education programs for children with impaired vision (as stated by Ladislav Bláha<sup>2</sup>).

The ambition of Blind Circus is to become not only an original physical-education activity but also to provide space for self realization and communication through artistic expression. The courses - taught by experienced circus lecturers and professional circus artists - involve the creation of a performance with talented young students of CIRQUEON - A Center For Contemporary Circus and Blind-Circus participants with impaired vision to be presented at the end of the program. Both groups cooperate, train and share the effort to reach a common goal. In training and during activities which emphasize personal trust, closeness and cooperation, the group of participants becomes a team as personal connections, understanding and friendships are established between them, transcending the limits of the circus environment into the daily life. Blind Circus considers the integration aspect of its activities very important and expects the experience of this cooperation to benefit all involved.

Blind Circus also aims to disrupt the stereotypes relating to people with impaired vision and to highlight their abilities and potential. People often consider the world of circus magic, exotic and inaccessible - mostly due to their own fear to enter it. Perhaps the fact that people with impaired vision can enter the circus world and present their achievements in a circus performance can help shatter the stereotypes that surround them.

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<sup>2</sup> BLÁHA, Ladislav, Zbyněk JANEČKA and Roman HERINK. Vybrané problémové okruhy integrace dětí se zrakovým postižením do školní tělesné výchovy. Aplikované pohybové aktivity v teorii a praxi [online]. 2010, roč. 1, č. 2, s. 7 [quoted 2013-03-25]. Available at: (in Czech)

## **blind circus**

### **the first steps**

When we initially discussed the idea of Blind Circus with friends, colleagues but also with professionals working with people with impaired vision, we often met with disbelief and stereotypical comments such as “Circus is pretty dangerous even for people who can see”, “Circus is too hard for people with impaired vision” or “Do you expect the blind to jump through burning hoops and tame their guide dogs in front of people?”.

In this chapter, we will take the liberty to argue with such statements. Risk is a fundamental element of circus which makes circus attractive not only to the audience but also to the performers. A juggler risks dropping the objects they are juggling, rope walkers and acrobats are actually risking their health. However, risk is also an integral part of our lives. A baby is risking a fall while learning to walk, a child is taking the same risk when learning to ride the bicycle. Students risk failure if they underestimate the difficulty of an examination. An entrepreneur is risking bankruptcy when starting a business. After all, “No risk, no gain”. Children can’t learn to walk or ride a bicycle without risking a fall. Students can’t graduate from college if they are too afraid to take exams and entrepreneurs can’t succeed unless they overcome their fear of failure.

If we consider safety synonymous with the absence of risk, we must conclude that circus is unsafe. We live in times when people tend to adopt the terminology of economics for their daily lives which leads them to view removal of risks as a step towards the success of their “life business”. However, life is not a business. In the courses we teach, we meet children who are growing up in an environment ridden with various dangers and who keep being reminded by their parents not to ride their bicycles so that they don’t fall, not to climb trees, not to jump, not to run, not to do all kinds of things. Their parents ignore the fact that occasional bruised knees and mistakes once contributed to the formation of their self-confidence. How are children supposed to gain self-confidence from succeeding in a challenge if they aren’t allowed to take it on in the first place? They become “porcelain children” who prefer to not even try, because it’s safer.

Aren’t those who see circus arts as a dangerous and therefore unsuitable activity for people with impaired vision just like the parents of the “porcelain children”? Isn’t their prejudice a symptom of their disrespect for people with impaired vision when they consider it necessary to decide on their behalf what is and isn’t right for them to do? Unfortunately, the trend of preferring control over assistance still dominates social work in the Czech Republic and therefore we often meet with reservations when dealing with professionals in this field. We find such distrust less surprising when expressed by the general public as people with disabilities are still widely regarded as incapable

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of integrating in the society, needing our maximum help (read: control) and therefore helping them means taking on the role of their parent who assumes the responsibility for their well-being and safety. Thus, people who forbid their children to ride bicycles necessarily see the notion of circus courses for clients with impaired vision as a contradiction in terms. Actually, the same goes for all other physical activities. Therefore many children with impaired vision don't do any sports and don't play games that involve movement, which in turn excludes them from the company of their peers. Similarly, adults who have been brought up this way find it hard to find the courage to try sports and physical activities.

On the other hand, there is Jan Říha, the Czech climber without eyesight, who has conquered Mont Blanc and there are other people with impaired vision who ride bicycles, practice archery, play soccer, etc. In other words, we already know that people with impaired vision have no constraints that would necessarily exclude them from any activities. Clearly, they can only engage in certain activities in modified environments which means they require special equipment or a degree of assistance. Rather than labeling the involvement of people with impaired vision in certain activities as unsuitable or outright nonsensical, we find it more sensible to look for ways how to modify the conditions and the environment so that people with impaired vision can do the same as everybody else. This way, we have to abandon not only the approach of segregation but also that of integration and move towards the approach of inclusion.

The inclusive approach means not only accepting those who are different among "us" (integration) but also being aware of their differences – such as impaired vision – and accepting unconditional mutual respect. The goal is to create conditions facilitating equal opportunities and resources which in our case translates to enabling people with impaired vision to take part in any activities including circus regardless of how crazy it may sound.

The goal of this chapter was to describe the difficult first steps of the preparation of this project and to emphasize that the distrust of both the professional and general public we had encountered was founded in prejudice. Circus can be and is an excellent comprehensive physical activity which contributes to not only the physical but also the emotional and personal development of those who practice it. In the following chapters, we will try to describe individual circus techniques and their benefits for people with impaired vision.

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### **circus techniques in relation to people with impaired vision**

#### **socialization**

The somewhat impersonal term of “socialization” actually means joy of a shared activity, being together with others and establishing new human relationships. People are social beings. Philosophers have devoted much thought to how people need each other and how they are only able to find themselves in or through other people. People find such relationships in their families, in their circle of friends, in their workplace and through their pastime activities. People who are, for example, unemployed or don't have any hobbies lose a great potential for establishing new human relationships and building up social capital.

We see Blind Circus as a leisure-time activity for people with impaired vision. We run two courses each of which has a slightly different effect on socialization. The first course is for adult students and takes place on Wednesday mornings. It is frequented mostly by people who have no job. Unfortunately, unemployment is a common problem of people with impaired vision which deprives them of the opportunity to establish new social contacts in the workplace. There is an unfortunate general trend for the long-term unemployed to succumb to frustration and indifference even in their leisure-time activities and to shut themselves off from the outside world which is the beginning of the path towards social exclusion. For people with impaired vision who are unemployed in the long term, quality leisure-time activities can play an important role. Our current students tell us that they also like to visit our Wednesday circus lessons because of the friendly atmosphere. Friendships emerge and we arrange meetings outside of the courses. Recently, we organized an international social-circus project entitled Educircation and we invited our Blind Circus students to one of the open workshops. Their meeting with foreign artists was very much appreciated by both sides, especially thanks to the stilt-walking class which intrigued our students so much that we immediately procured telescopic stilts for Cirqueon.

In Blind Circus and in circus education in general, human relationships are tools of the same or greater importance than juggling clubs, balls or aerial silks.

Besides the course for adults, Blind Circus also has a program for teenagers. Its socialization goals are very similar to those mentioned above as it aims to become a fulfilling leisure-time activity. However apart from providing physical activity, it also aims to educate in a more general sense just as all other Cirqueon courses for teenagers. In this respect, the socialization effect is reinforced by encounters of students from across our courses. Encounters of Blind Circus students and students of

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other courses are beneficial for both sides which the following chapter discusses in more detail.

## **integration of teenagers**

Starting in the summer semester, we decided to restructure the Blind Circus courses for teenagers so that we merged their training with bonus classes for students of the regular teenager courses.

We have several goals and visions. First of all, we want to offer our Blind Circus students the support of a broader circle of their peers who share the same hobby. By increasing the number of friends intensively training in the same space, we want to create an inspiring environment which motivates the students to work on their skills and abilities, helps develop mutual cooperation and stimulates creativity and integration of Blind Circus students in joint performances.

At the same time, the Blind Circus students can easily find equal training partners (as far as age, weight and skill level is concerned) for pair or team activities. When at least one participant in a human pyramid can see, the whole group feels more confident to let go of the supporters and assume the intended position. Consequently, the work and training tempo at which new group choreographies, partner-acrobatics or juggling sequences are created rapidly increases which brings more enjoyment and sense of success and accomplishment.

The students can share advice, teach each other new things, provide each other security (e. g., in balance and acrobatic figures). In an environment of curiosity and exploration where everybody is learning new things and each individual possesses a unique talent, all differences disappear. Everybody is on the same team. A tight group of friends provides the opportunity to at least temporarily forget the difficulties of life outside of circus.

At the same time, we want to offer our regular students this unique opportunity to see the world from a different perspective. The need to look for alternative ways of expression to explain a movement or a position to a friend with impaired vision enhances the understanding of the actual figure being learned. Everybody can try to do various tricks with closed eyes or blindfolded, try to find orientation in a space full of sounds, or even in their own body and imagination without using the eyes. Such experience leads them to better understanding the effects of vision impairment which in turn strengthens their empathy for the needs of people with various limitations, as well as their patience and tolerance.

We firmly believe that the joy and success experienced during shared training of teenagers will grow even further and that our students will enjoy these classes even more. They have our

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full support and enthusiasm. We can't wait to see all the things our "youngos" will come up with together.

As a new integration activity, we are preparing an educational course for these teenagers in cooperation with the Okamžik organization which supports people with impaired vision on many levels. The course should teach the teenagers the basic rules for communication with people with impaired vision and offer an insight into their life through various activities.

## juggling

Jirka, one of our students, often likes to share stories he finds funny about how people he knows react to the news of him practicing juggling. He says that often they think they must've misheard or that he is pulling their leg. To many people, juggling is a mystery, something superhumanly difficult and accessible only to natural-born circus artists. The idea of juggling without being able to see is inconceivable to them.

Frankly, there's nothing superhuman about juggling and anybody can learn it. At the same time we must admit that lack of vision makes mastering classic juggling – throwing objects in the air with one hand and catching them with the other hand – very difficult. Therefore, the astonishment over Jirka's hobby is somewhat justified. However, juggling isn't just throwing and catching as the modern definition of juggling is based on the notion of manipulation, which is also the foundation for our Blind Circus courses.

Manipulation of objects in general is an extremely important part of the life of people with impaired vision. "The object-manipulation game is actually considered one of the first and most important ways children with impaired visions play."<sup>3</sup> Children with impaired vision also show delayed development of such skills as throwing, catching, reaching for moving objects or the awareness of their own body and the space.<sup>4</sup> Juggling can significantly influence the compensation process of this delay.

We should also mention other positive effects of juggling which aren't exclusive to people with impaired vision but pertain to all who practice it. Scientists have proven that juggling is a unique activity which actually physiologically influences the structure of the brain and its parts relevant to spatial orientation. There is no doubt juggling promotes the ability to concentrate, improves fine motor skills, reaction speed, neuromuscular coordination,

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3 KUČEROVÁ, Pavlína. *Hra v životě zrakově postiženého jedince s důrazem na integrační proces*. Brno, 2008. Bakalářská práce. Masarykova univerzita. Str. 25

4 BLÁHA, Ladislav, Zbyněk JANEČKA a Roman HERINK. Vybrané problémové okruhy integrace dětí se zrakovým postižením do školní tělesné výchovy. *Aplikované pohybové aktivity v teorii a praxi* [online]. 2010, roč. 1, č. 2, s. 7 [cit. 2013-03-25]. Dostupné z: [http://www.apa.upol.cz/web/images/stories/casopis/02/Problemove\\_okruhy2.pdf](http://www.apa.upol.cz/web/images/stories/casopis/02/Problemove_okruhy2.pdf)

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perception of the body, requires patience and endurance and increases self-esteem by offering the feeling of accomplishment and success in overcoming one's limits and discovering new possibilities. It develops creativity in combination with music and dance and becomes a strong means of artistic self expression.

## **equilibristics – the art of balancing**

Equilibristics, or the art of keeping one's balance, is one of the fundamental circus techniques. It includes rope walking, balancing on a board on a cylinder, balancing on a ball and stilt walking but balance is also an integral part of other areas of circus, such as handstands or partner acrobatics where two acrobats seek a common synergy. Equilibristics not only pervades all circus techniques, it is also an important part of our life. Balancing means the ability to maintain stability, to return to a stable position after the body has been tilted or swayed into instability. We learn to keep our balance since a very early age and this ability is closely related to the correct body posture and acquisition of motor skills.

Learning balance skills is very important to people with impaired vision. There is a study which proves that a delay in the development of balance abilities is directly related to vision impairment<sup>5</sup>.

Equilibristics offer various exercises and props which offer an entertaining motivation for learning to keep balance. In the Blind Circus courses, there is one student who specifically focuses on equilibristics and states that he is attracted to the impossible. He regularly practices on a training device of his own construction: a narrow wooden lath which he walks on as if it were the rope. He also tries to walk a real tight rope. However, he is most attracted to and most intensively trains walking on a balance ball. He is already able to move on it on his own. Another student said he started taking Blind Circus courses under the pretext of improving his balance skills.

Blind Circus uses equilibristics to help its students improve their balance and neuromuscular coordination. Another equally important element is the cooperation and trust among students who often assist each other when trying to balance on stilts, the rope or other equipment. The most important asset is the positive motivation which arises from a friendly, non-competitive environment and learning through play which is the most natural way to acquire new skills.

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<sup>5</sup> BLÁHA, Ladislav, Zbyněk JANEČKA a Roman HERINK. Vybrané problémové okruhy integrace dětí se zrakovým postižením do školní tělesné výchovy. *Aplikované pohybové aktivity v teorii a praxi* [online]. 2010, roč. 1, č. 2, s. 7 [cit. 2013-03-25]. Dostupné z: [http://www.apa.upol.cz/web/images/stories/casopis/02/Problemove\\_okruhy2.pdf](http://www.apa.upol.cz/web/images/stories/casopis/02/Problemove_okruhy2.pdf)

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### **acrobatics**

Acrobatics is a traditional circus and athletic activity based on the ability to control one's own body. Acrobats seek their own limits to push them farther while discovering new movements and body positions. It is a form of manipulation and juggling with the acrobat's own body. Therefore, an acrobat becomes familiar with both the feeling of a juggler or manipulator who needs to imagine the path of the juggled object as precisely as possible but also with the experience of the juggled object itself, what is happening with the body as it moves through space. In dynamic movements and positions which involve unusual body inclinations (e.g., head down), finding orientation in the space, even figuring out which way is up and down or left and right, is a surprising experience.

In this exact sense, acrobatics can be beneficial to people with impaired vision as its nature seamlessly provides an element of motivation and an opportunity for providing positive experience with their own bodies.

Acrobatics isn't just personal skills and achievements but often, it involves cooperation with others which contributes to the development of social skills and also creates opportunities for interaction between people with impaired vision and those who can see. This aspect necessitates trust among the training partners and creates opportunities for sharing feelings of success.

### **floor acrobatics (individual)**

Floor acrobatics is mostly individual work with one's own body in relation to the floor. It comprises standard elements of basic gymnastics which we all should know from elementary school and high school. These activities teach us about our own body. We learn which muscles take part in which movements, how willing they are to cooperate with our intentions and when they resist our intent. The brain learns to control the necessary neural paths and to send precise and clear instructions to the peripheral regions of our bodies.

When training floor acrobatics, we improve our physical condition, learn to tight and relax our body and extend the flexibility of our limbs and joints. The trainees experience simple rotation of the body (twists, rolls, cartwheels) and learn orientation in the space, in their own bodies and in unusual positions of the head (which houses the balance organs). They learn to trust their body and to be aware of the space around them (in this case, the floor – soft landings on the toes, double-action of the ankles, protecting the head, the rounding principle, motion dynamics, the eccentric force, etc.).

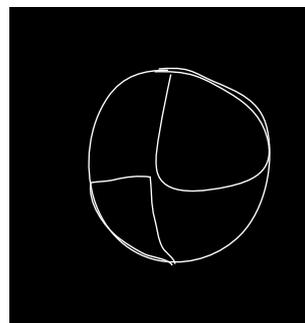
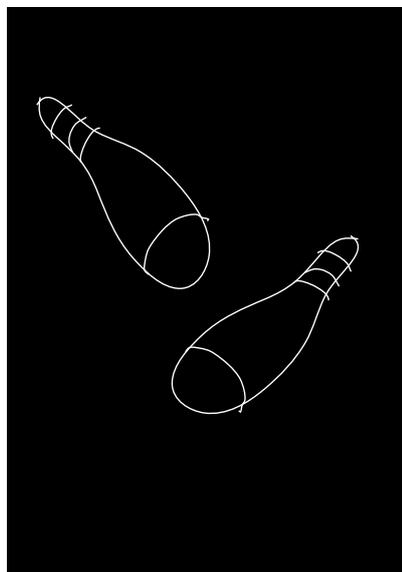
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### floor acrobatics with a partner (and in a group)

This field extends the basic individual acrobatic skills. The trainees must be able to control their bodies, tigh themselves as necessary, engage various muscle groups in combination and be able to stay in the assumed positions for a certain amount of time. The benefit is the development of balance and the awareness of the center of mass and learning to combine explosive and static phases.

Since at least two trainees are involved, the training greatly develops the ability to cooperate and the awareness of the exercise partner or partners. Empathy and sensitivity are indispensable. Every movement or position must be first thoroughly explained to be safely carried out, therefore communication skills are being cultivated to a great degree. Unique bonds are established between students, which are founded on trust, understanding, curiosity and the desire to help each other.

At the same time, the trainees begin to assume different roles - everybody finds his own place. Stout individuals who may have difficulties lifting their own bodies in the air (e.g., in aerial acrobatics) or supporting it in a demanding position (such as a handstand) find their physique excellent for the base role in partner or group acrobatics where the base must be able to safely support, hold or balance their flyer for a sufficient amount of time so that they can reach the desired position.

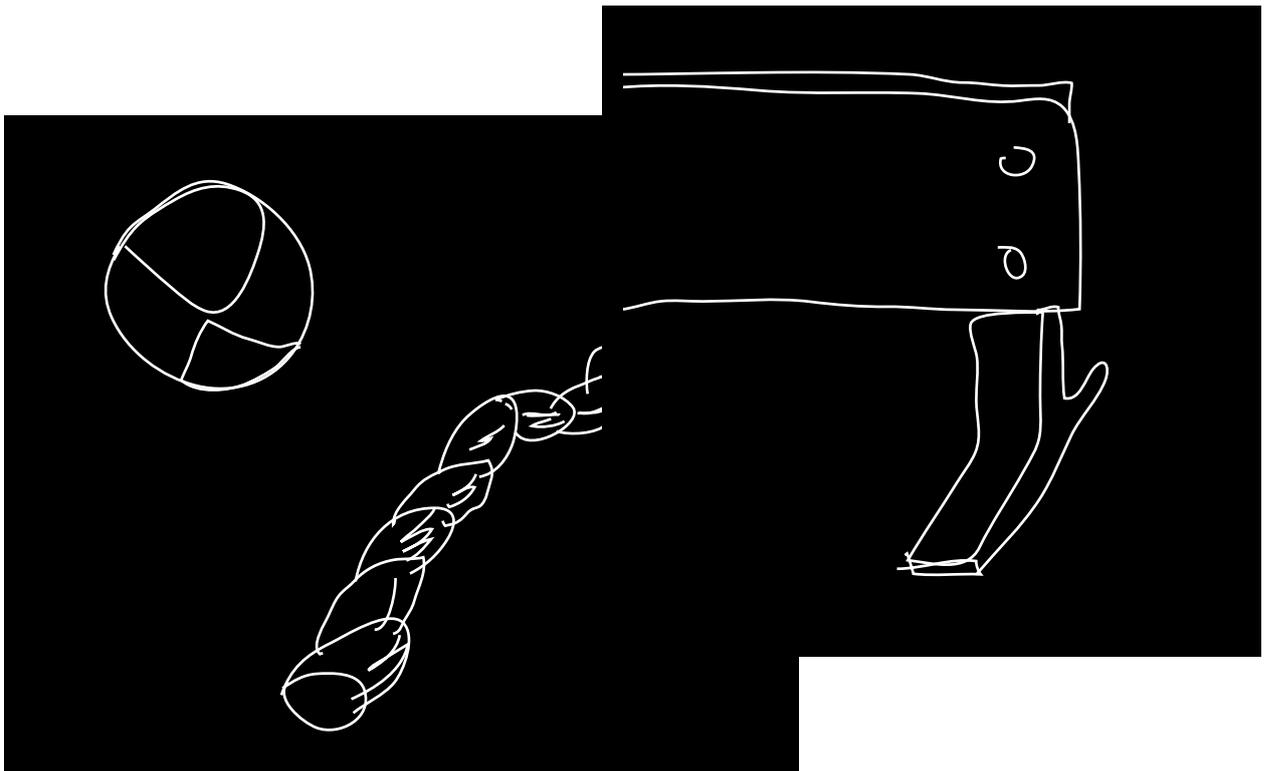


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### aerial acrobatics

Aerial acrobatics take their practitioners into an unnatural environment: the air. Just as in rock climbing (on artificial climbing walls or natural cliffs), the beginner must first attain the necessary physical strength. The arms must get used to a new kind exertion, the legs and feet need to gain confidence in manipulating the material (silk or rope) and the trainee has to learn to trust their muscles (for example, when hanging by the knees on the trapeze). The students gain new self confidence, enhance their awareness of the principles of various movements and the mechanics of the human body. They learn to engage various muscle groups to the correct degree and to relax in unusual positions or settings.

To people with impaired vision, this is a great challenge which demands a high degree of trust in themselves and their trainer. It makes maximum use of their imagination: How do you imagine movements and positions you've never seen or done based on the trainer's description? There is a focus on spatial orientation as this is often the first time the students lose contact with the ground or a firm support in a controlled way for a prolonged time. Furthermore, silks, ropes or the trapeze often naturally swing or turn and many positions place the trainee head-down which is usually a challenge for the balance system of the inner ear.



## **Students' Feedback**

Mojža

*I've been fond of circus ever since I remember, even though I could never actually see it. As I a child, I loved the atmosphere of the performances. Later, I discovered Eduard Bass and his Cirkus Humberto (The Humberto Circus) and Lidé z Maringotek (People from the Caravans – author's note: classical works of Czech literature).*

*I've always felt the performances went to the farthest limits while being carried out under precise control with no room for "maybe it works out, maybe it doesn't.". Many things in my life actually work the same way.*

*It might sound strange that I've only experienced circus first hand in my sixties. I've found people – or they've found me,... Anyway, one day, I got an e-mail from somebody offering to teach me his circus tricks saying they wouldn't mind me not being able to see what's happening. To the contrary: my lack of eyesight would be perceived as an advantage in this project. In the light of what I've written in the beginning, there was no reason to hesitate. Out of all the options offered, I'm most drawn to the balance techniques. It's not that I'm extremely good at them – I'm not – but I'm curious if it's possible at all, if a person who doesn't see can play bear on the ball or walk a tight rope, because the sages and their tomes claim it's impossible.*

*It's also great to be around people who see my endeavors as normal, who calmly tell me that my feeling that half a year of training hasn't taught me anything is absolutely normal.*

*So, what good does it do to a person who can't see to learn to walk a rope? How does it help him in his life?*

*I don't know! Maybe I'll know when I actually learn it.*

*Right now, I see circus as performances which often seem risky, pushing the limits of the possible but at the same time, they are under uncompromising control. The prime purpose of these performances isn't to get me attention, nor give me the feeling that I've overcome my limits. Of course, it's great when people clap some but I believe the most important meaning is to experience the feeling that I can do something and I know I can do it.*

*Perhaps in reality, today's circus is about something completely different and this is just my beautiful but very naive perception. But, please, do us all a favor: don't try to explain to me how it really is. It would be a waste of time.*

Jirka

*I learned about Blind Circus from an e-mail invitation from the Okamžik organization which provides auspices for and informs about various activities for people with impaired*

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*vision. The fact that I eventually started taking these classes is very much due to Petra, my assistant, who went to the demonstration lesson with me. We tried various circus techniques such as silk acrobatics, various rolls on the floor and human pyramids but none of it intrigued me very much while some of the things actually made me feel not so well. Juggling was a completely different story. I loved it and I was excited about it! I always used to play the ball. Had I known about juggling 20, 10 or even just 5 years ago! The kind of juggling we do here and which I practice isn't about throwing things in the air which is hard without being able to see. It's more about manipulating the ball in various ways. With let's say 3 balls, we try to pass them from hand to hand or hold them in different places on the body. It took me really long but I'm getting good at it and it makes me really happy.*

*Apart from what we do there, I also like the courses because of the friendship among the people who come there and because of our fantastic teachers. They are professional with us (to the point that I must admire how well they can handle us). We've trained them really well.*

*When I recall the first lesson we had half a year ago and realize how far I've gone since then, I'm in constant amazement at all the things I can do. I can't believe I can put a ball on my head and keep it there. And when it starts falling, I catch it with my hand. A month ago, I started being a bit skeptical. I felt I had reached the limit of my capabilities. But now, I keep discovering more and more new things, such as juggling against the belly. That's a great advancement. We'll see how it goes, but don't think I'm not skeptical any more, because I still am.*

### **Cilka**

*When the offer of Blind Circus reached me, I didn't have to think twice at all. I knew right away I had to give it a try, because trying couldn't hurt. Soon I found out I had done right. The great people who always have a smile on their faces, their enthusiasm about "circus stuff", great willingness and helpfulness. It's also important that they deal with me and the other friends who have a certain handicap without any prejudice. Our training sessions are fantastic. We always have fun, no matter whether people are juggling, hanging on the trapeze, climbing on the silks or walking on a ball.*

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## blind circus

CIRQUEON is an umbrella organization for the support and development of contemporary circus in the Czech Republic. CIRQUEON is a member of the international Circostrada Network, Caravan Network, Fresh Arts Coalition Europe (FACE), European Federation of Professional Circus Schools (Fedec) and International Association of Libraries, Museums, Archives and Documentation Centres of the Performing Arts (SIMBAS). The main purpose of Cirqueon is to provide information on domestic and European events in the field of contemporary circus, to support contemporary circus projects created in the Czech Republic and to aid the development of circus skills of professionals and the general public

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blind circus  
– benefits of circus arts for people  
with impaired vision

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