

Balancing act

Husband and wife team enjoy the thrill of the high wire

By Donna Dunn

From the ground, the petite woman balancing 60 feet up seems to glide magically across the thin metal wire strung across the top of the Clyde Beatty-Cole Bros. Circus tent.

But there is no magic involved in Werner and Aura Guerrero's high-wire act. There are no protective straps, no special tricks, not even a safety net, although thick pads had been placed beneath the performers during a Saturday performance in Winchester. Only the wire and a 40-pound balancing pole aid the husband-and-wife team in their defiance of gravity.

"When you go up and you touch the cable, there is a little bit of fear," said Aura Guerrero, a 17-year veteran of the high wire. "You have to be very careful. You must respect it. You cannot play around."

As recently as last week, Werner Guerrero slipped on the wire, caught himself and pulled a muscle in his leg. As a result, Ms. Guerrero was scheduled to perform a solo act over the weekend during the 72nd Shenandoah Apple Blossom Festival. Her husband, though, had recovered sufficiently to join her Saturday.

"A slip doesn't happen very often, but it can happen at any time," Guerrero said while rubbing the sore leg Friday beneath his shiny, gold Spandex-like costume.

His latest slip was precipitated by children running beneath the wire.

"The smallest move can throw you off," he said.

Before the Guerreros take the wire, the audience is advised to remain seated and keep silent. But rarely does the audience take this warning seriously, he said.

"Here, the circus, the audience likes it, but they're not disciplined to know how dangerous it is,"

Guerrero said. "The wire is unpredictable and very dangerous. Even people in the show don't realize how dangerous it is."

Guerrero, who began performing more than 30 years ago at age 6 with his world-famous high-wire family, does know the danger. He is a fifth generation high-wire performer.

He has had two serious falls. In 1978, when he performed with Ringling Brothers, he broke nearly half the bones in his body. Just last year with Ringling Brothers in Richmond, his older brother fell and is now

confined to a wheelchair. "When you get injured, you think you're killing yourself," Guerrero said. "Like my brother would say no money is worth it."

Yet, Guerrero continues to perform and won't consider a safety net unless it is mandated by state's law. In Virginia, performers aren't required to use a net.

"In the old days, it spoiled the thrill," he said.

Guerrero, who was born in Colombia, has traveled throughout various shows most of his life. He and Mr. Guerrero met in Spain, while both were traveling with the circus. Mr. Guerrero has been an acrobat performer, but she soon became part of the Guerrero family high-wire act.

"When I got married, I said, 'I won't come down,'" she said. So she went up.

Originally from Portugal, Mr. Guerrero said she still gets nervous before each performance.

"I am always nervous," she said. "Every day before I go up, my stomach is like a stone."

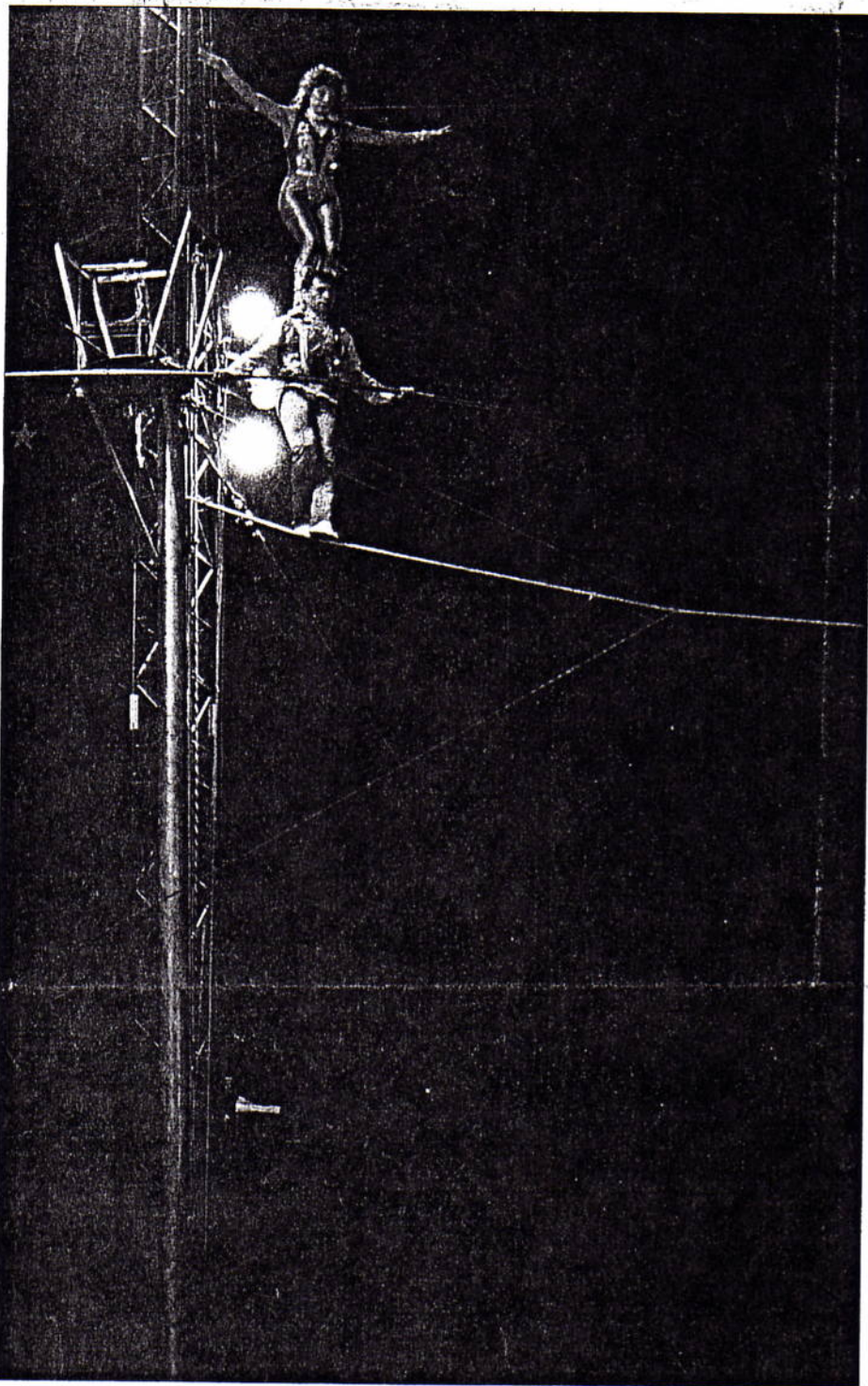
The couple, who have traveled all over the world, is in their first year with the Cole Bros. Circus. Along with their 12-year-old daughter, they drive their truck and trailer across the United States performing in the world.



Circus



Daring duo: Werner and Aura Guerrero pose outside of the Clyde Beatty-Cole Bros. Circus tent.



Daily staff photos by Greg Descheemaeker

Watch that last step: Aura Guerrero stands on her husband's shoulders as he begins the treacherous descent on the high wire near the end of their performance at the Clyde Beatty-Cole Bros. Circus Saturday.