Rocking Horse Ranch Sidewalker Handout

**The role of the sidewalker is to be an extension of the instructor in order to encourage the rider to grow and develop to their fullest potential.**

Sidewalking is the most hands-on position in a therapeutic riding lesson and they have a significant influence on the success of the lesson. Sidewalkers are directly responsible for the rider and provide supervision for the rider from the time they arrive until they leave. Teams must work harmoniously and smoothly for the benefit of the rider. If you feel uncomfortable for any reason with your team, please discuss this with your instructor or RHR staff member. The role of the sidewalker varies greatly between riders. It is important to have an understanding of the rider’s needs and knowledge of their goals. Please ask the instructor to provide this information to you when the rider is not present.

There may be opportunities to talk socially with your rider and you may do so. However, please do not disrupt the lesson. Many students have trouble concentrating so please take care not to interrupt the direct line of focus between rider and instructor.

**Riding Skills**

It is not necessary for sidewalkers to have any horse experience; however, working knowledge of basic riding skills will help ensure the effective instruction and safety of the rider.

* Position of foot in stirrup – safety stirrup rubber band facing outside, ball of foot rests stirrup bar, heel down/toe up
* Holding reins – fingers closed around reins and held up like ice cream cones
* Posture and alignment of rider - ear, shoulder, hip, heel in alignment
* Walking – say “walk on” and squeeze legs (if student is advanced enough to use leg aids)
* Trotting – say “trot” and squeeze legs (if student is advanced enough to use leg aids)
* Halting – say “whoa” and pull back on reins (if student is advanced enough to use reins)
* Backing – say “back” and pull back on reins while squeezing legs (if student is advanced enough to use leg aids and reins)
* Turning – pull respective rein back towards rider’s right pocket for a right turn or towards rider’s left pocket for a left turn
* Two point position – “jumping position” rider leans forward and slightly out of saddle

**Before the Lesson**

* Arrive at least 10 minutes prior to the start of class
* Check the schedule for your assignment (on purple clip board on receptionist desk)
* Get name tag from volunteer station
* While waiting for your rider, help the instructor set up the arena if needed
* Inquire about the rider and what assistance you should give prior to the start of the lesson
* When your rider arrives, greet him and if necessary, help him find and put on his or her helmet
* Wait with the rider in the waiting room until the instructor comes to get you; this is a good time to get to know the rider
* Do not leave the waiting room with the student unless you are instructed to do so

**Mounting**

* When the instructor says it is time to mount, escort your rider to the designated mounting area with the instructor.
* Follow the instructor’s directions during the mount. You may be used as an offside person or you may be assisting with opening/closing of arena gates if there are 2 sidewalkers.
* As an offside person: when the horse is entering the ramp place your hand on the horses shoulder to guide the horse towards the student (do not push the horse hard). Depending on the ability of the rider, you may also be asked to guide their leg over the rump or push down in the stirrup near you. The instructor will give you specific knowledge on what to do.

**During the Lesson**

* Instructors will inform the sidewalkers about the kind of assistance the rider needs.
* If a rider has one sidewalker, the leader and sidewalker should walk on opposite sides of the horse (unless otherwise told by instructor).
* Sidewalkers should keep talking to a minimum but communicate with the team when needed.
* Use good body mechanics and your peripheral vision.
* If you are falling behind during a lesson (for example, at the trot) do not run up behind the horse. Wait for the horse leader to halt the horse before resuming your position.
* Never place your hand or fingers in any of the saddle’s rings or buckles while sidewalking.
* If a rider or horse behaves inappropriately or in an unsafe manner, notify the instructor immediately.
* Never leave your position next to the rider. Never leave your rider to pick up a dropped item. Inform the instructor. If you need to stop for any reason the whole team stops with you.
* DO NOT interfere with the horse by petting, poking, leaning or bumping. Allow the leader to do the job of moving the horse forward.
* Inform the instructor if you need to switch sides or cannot continue your role of sidewalker for any reason.

**When there are 2 Sidewalkers**

* If physical supports are being used, ensure you are applying the same support and to the same degree so the rider is receiving even input on each side. Communicate with the other sidewalker if you are changing to a different type of physical support.
* If there are two sidewalkers, work together with the other sidewalker so you are not competing for the rider’s attention.
* Take turns giving instruction to the rider at appropriate times. Only the sidewalker on the side the rider is being directed to should talk. For instance, if the rider is asked to pick up a ball from the right side, then only the right sidewalker should verbally reinforce the instructions, while the left sidewalker stays quiet.
* Don’t be offended if the rider prefers to interact with one sidewalker over the other. Use this to your advantage and have the rider only communicate with the preferred sidewalker if it will help them succeed.

**Physical Support**

* Providing physical support to a rider can be tiring. Inform the instructor if you begin to fatigue so you can switch sides. Sidewalkers should decide who goes first and change sides one at a time, walking around the front of the horse and resuming the hold on the opposite side so the rider is never without a physical hold.
* Never apply a physical hold over a joint.
* *Thigh Hold* – Sidewalker places a forearm gently over the thigh and holds the front of the saddle, pad or surcingle. Do not apply excessive pressure with your forearm. Pressure on the thigh can increase or cause spasticity, especially for people with Cerebral Palsy.
* Ankle hold - Hold back of ankle/cup back of heel
* Calf hold - Rest hand on top of rider’s calf
* Spotter position – Sidewalker walks beside the rider, prepared to give hands-on physical support if needed



**Instructional Support**

* Some riders do not require any “hands on” assistance, just someone to walk beside them to keep them focused on the tasks.
* Sidewalkers should help the rider focus his attention on the instructor.
* Avoid unnecessary talking with the rider or other volunteers.
* Allow enough time for the rider to process directions. Too much input can be overwhelming to riders who have perceptual problems.
* Avoid being so competitive during games that the rider doesn’t get to use their own skills because you do it for them in an all out effort to win.
* Physical Prompt – If the instructor says “turn right” gently tap the right hand.
* Hand-Over-Hand - If the instructor says “turn right”, place your hand over the rider’s right hand and pull the rein to turn the horse right.
* Gestured Prompt –If the instructor says “turn right”, motion with your right hand as if you are pulling the rein to turn right.
* Verbal Prompt –If the instructor says “turn right”, restate the instruction in simple terms.

**Dismounting & Conclusion of the Lesson**

* Follow the instructor’s directions during the dismount.
* The sidewalker may remove the rider’s foot from the stirrup and help guide the leg over at the instructor’s request.
* When appropriate, encourage the rider to thank the volunteers and give their horse a pat.
* If necessary, the sidewalker can assist the rider in putting their helmet away properly.
* Stay with your rider until they are returned to a parent or guardian or you are no longer needed.

**Spooks**

If a horse spooks, remain calm and stay with the rider as best as you can. Immediately assume a thigh hold to help keep the rider on the horse. As the horse moves, sidewalkers need to continue their support to the rider, staying close to the horse’s side as it moves. If the horse’s behavior becomes dangerous, the instructor may call for an emergency dismount. When an instructor calls for an emergency dismount, horse leaders halt and turn to face their horse. The instructor will perform the emergency dismount unless a sidewalker is trained to do so and asked.

**Falls**

Though falls are very rare, they can and do happen. If your rider falls, stay with the rider and follow the directions of the instructor. Do not panic if there is a fall, stay calm so you are able to assist the rider and instructor. Sidewalkers may be asked to assist by retrieving a first aid kit, calling for emergency medical assistance (911), and locating the rider’s emergency medical form (located in the rider file cabinet in the main office). An accident report must be completed by staff and involved individuals for every accident.

**Interacting with People with Disabilities**

If you have never had the opportunity to meet people with disabilities, this aspect of volunteering at RHR can be intimidating and a little frightening at first. You may be feeling insecure about how to act or react to people who may look, sound, move, and behave differently from what you usually expect.

* A person with a disability is an individual first and is entitled to the same dignity, respect, and considerations expected by anyone.
* Treat adults as adults. Only help a person with a disability if they ask for assistance. You may offer assistance, but if it is declined, do not be offended.
* When assisting an individual with a disability always ask “how” you can help. Do not take over.
* Always address a person with a disability directly. Do not speak about them as if they are not present.
* Do not shout. Hearing aids make noises louder, not clearer. Blindness does not affect hearing.
* When speaking to someone with a hearing impairment, speak slowly, clearly and face them directly while speaking.
* If a person has difficulty speaking, allow them to finish their sentence. If you do not understand what they are saying, tell them so. Do not pretend you understood if you didn’t.
* When meeting a person with a visual impairment, always identify yourself and tell them you are leaving before you walk away.
* Do not push a person’s wheelchair, grab their arm or try to help without asking first. Never move someone’s crutches, walkers, canes, service animal or other mobility aid without permission.
* When speaking to a person with a disability who uses a wheelchair, find yourself a chair or crouch down at a comfortable distance so that you can converse on the same level.

**“People First” Language**

* The individual is always placed before the disability. It is a “person with a disability” - not a “disabled person.”
* Never refer to a person by their disability, for example a “paraplegic” or a “blind” person. The accepted terminology is a “person who has paraplegia” or a “person who is blind.”
* People are not “confined” or “bound” to wheelchairs. They “use” these devices for mobility and to enhance their freedom. It is more appropriate to say “an individual who uses a wheelchair.”
* Completely avoid emotionally laden terms such as “suffering with a disease”, “afflicted with” or “burdened by”. A person with a disability may “have” an illness or may be “challenged” by a condition, but one should never assume that a person is suffering, burdened or afflicted.
* When writing or speaking about individuals with disabilities always focus on ability, accomplishment and quality of life.
* Avoid using “us” and “them” language when speaking of people with disabilities versus people who are able bodied.

**Non-Verbal or Limited Verbal Expression**

Many of our participants are non-verbal or limited in their verbal expression. To enhance communication with these individuals, instructors, therapists, and volunteers may reinforce requests and directions with basic American Sign Language (ASL).