

SADDLE UP! VOLUNTEER ONBOARDING

Sidewalker 101

A practical guide for volunteers supporting riders with safety, confidence, and care.

“Sidewalkers are a direct extension of the Instructor, and are always cognizant of their assigned participant.”

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THE ROLE

Your role is to support safety while protecting rider independence

A sidewalker walks beside the rider to help create a safe, successful lesson experience. Depending on the rider's needs, one or two sidewalkers may be assigned, but the goal stays the same: help the rider participate as fully as possible without giving more help than is needed.

The best support is often the smallest support that still helps the rider succeed.

FOLLOW THE PLAN

Support the rider in the way the Instructor directs.

STAY ALERT

Watch the rider, the Instructor, and the horse's response at all times.

ASK WHEN UNSURE

If you are not sure what your rider needs, pause and ask.



What this means in practice: Your support should help the rider feel secure, calm, and capable — never crowded, rushed, or over-assisted.

Every rider is different, so your support must adjust in real time

WHAT VARIES

Some riders need physical support. Some need help processing directions. Some need verbal prompting, while others need very little assistance at all. What works for one rider may not be right for another.

Strong sidewalking starts with noticing those differences and responding to them calmly.

WHAT CHANGES

Your role may shift from one lesson to the next and even within the same lesson. A rider may need more support during mounting, less support while settled, or more support again during transitions or new activities.

That is why volunteers stay flexible and keep taking cues from the Instructor.

OPERATING MINDSET

Stay attentive. Stay steady. Adjust only as needed.

Your job is not to anticipate every move or over-correct the rider. Your job is to notice what the rider needs, follow the Instructor's plan, and provide the least amount of help that still keeps the rider successful and safe.

TEAM ROLES

Interactive and supportive sidewalkers serve the same rider in different ways

ROLE ONE

Interactive Sidewalker

This sidewalker supports communication and participation. The role acts as an extension of the Instructor by helping the rider understand directions, complete tasks, and stay engaged in the lesson.

COMMUNICATION

May talk directly with the rider during grooming and the lesson, especially when repeating or reinforcing Instructor directions.

PARTICIPATION

Helps the rider carry out tasks such as grooming steps, riding activities, or other lesson directions as assigned.

SHARED PRINCIPLE

Both roles focus on the rider, not the horse — one leads more of the communication, and the other usually carries more of the physical support.

ROLE TWO

Supportive Sidewalker

This sidewalker supports physical safety and stability. When two sidewalkers are present, this role is usually more hands-on and typically does not take the lead in talking with the rider unless directed otherwise.

PHYSICAL SUPPORT

Stays ready to provide the specific hold, spotting, or close rider support the Instructor has assigned.

POSITIONING

Maintains steady alignment beside the rider so support is immediate and consistent during movement and transitions.

Strong sidewalking comes from six simple habits done well

These habits make volunteer support more consistent, more confident, and more helpful to both the rider and the Instructor.

<p>01</p> <h2>Support with purpose</h2> <p>Offer only the support the rider needs, and only in the way the Instructor directs.</p>	<p>02</p> <h2>Promote independence</h2> <p>Avoid over-helping so the rider can participate as fully and confidently as possible.</p>	<p>03</p> <h2>Stay aligned</h2> <p>Keep your body even with the rider so you can respond quickly and support balance effectively.</p>
<p>04</p> <h2>Communicate clearly</h2> <p>When two sidewalkers are present, the Interactive Sidewalker usually takes the lead in talking with the rider.</p>	<p>05</p> <h2>Stay attentive</h2> <p>Watch the rider, the Instructor, and the horse's response at all times rather than letting your focus drift.</p>	<p>06</p> <h2>Protect privacy and focus</h2> <p>Do not use your phone or take photos and videos during lessons.</p>

In practice: the best sidewalkers are calm, observant, and consistent. They do not draw attention to themselves; they help the rider stay safe, capable, and engaged.

Holds are chosen to match balance, alignment, and lesson goals

A Saddle Up! Instructor will tell you whether your rider needs a hold and which one to use. The right hold depends on the rider's balance, movement, alignment, and the goals of that lesson.

This overview gives you the big picture before each hold is explained in more detail.

HOLD

PRIMARY USE

Over-the-thigh

Supports sitting balance and overall rider stability.

Heel hold

Supports lower-leg position and helps prevent unintended cues to the horse.

Combination hold

Supports both postural stability and lower-body alignment at the same time.

Gait belt hold

Used in therapy settings when a rider wears a gait belt and needs directed support.

Spotter

No physical hold is maintained; the volunteer stays within arm's reach and ready to assist.

Key reminder: the Instructor determines the hold, and your job is to apply it consistently, calmly, and with only the amount of support the rider needs.

Over-the-thigh and heel holds solve different support needs

OVER-THE-THIGH HOLD

Grip the front of the saddle near the pommel with the hand closest to the rider while your forearm rests gently on the rider's thigh.

WHAT TO WATCH

Avoid pressing your elbow into the rider's leg or the horse's side. The hold should steady the rider without adding pressure or discomfort.

WHEN IT IS USED

Use this hold when the rider needs more support for sitting balance, trunk stability, or controlled movement during transitions and more active work.

HEEL HOLD

Gently cup the back of the rider's heel with the hand closest to the rider so you can guide the heel forward, back, down, or slightly away from the horse's side.

WHAT TO WATCH

Guide the heel without manipulating the rider's joints. The purpose is to support alignment, not to force position.

WHEN IT IS USED

Use this hold when the rider needs help with lower-leg alignment or when unintended leg movement may accidentally cue the horse.

SHARED REMINDER

Both holds should be calm, intentional, and as light as possible. Your support should match the rider's needs and the Instructor's direction rather than becoming a constant correction.

Combination, gait belt, and spotter roles require precision and restraint

SUPPORT METHOD 01

Combination hold

The combination hold pairs an over-the-thigh hold with a heel hold. One arm supports the rider's thigh while the other hand supports the heel, helping the rider maintain both postural stability and lower-leg alignment.

WHEN IT IS USED

Use this hold when the rider needs both trunk support and help keeping the lower body in position.

SUPPORT METHOD 02

Gait belt hold

If a rider is wearing a gait belt, the Instructor may ask you to hold the belt rather than the rider directly. This is most often used in therapy settings during mounting, dismounting, or riding.

WHAT TO WATCH FOR

Use only the amount of pressure needed. Too much pull on the belt can easily throw the rider off balance.

SUPPORT METHOD 03

Spotter

A spotter walks beside the rider without maintaining a physical hold. Even without contact, this role still requires steady positioning, close attention, and immediate readiness to assist.

POSITIONING STANDARD

Stay evenly aligned with the rider and within arm's reach. Do not drift too far ahead or behind, or you may not be able to respond quickly if the horse trips or the rider shifts unexpectedly.

Your responsibility begins in the lobby and ends when the rider is safely returned

A sidewalker's job is not limited to the mounted portion of the lesson. You are part of the rider's support from the moment you meet them until the Instructor directs the close of the session.



On the ground matters too: grooming, transitions, waiting, and returning the rider are all part of steady, respectful support.

LESSON START

Meet your Instructor in the cross-ties, then go together to meet your rider in the lobby.

BEFORE RIDING

Stay with your rider and support them at the level that matches their independence during transitions, grooming, and preparation.

GROOMING AND TACKING

Help with supervision, hand-over-hand support, carrying items, and putting equipment away as needed.

MOUNTING AND DISMOUNTING

Remain within arm's reach unless the Instructor gives a different direction.

LESSON CLOSE

Stay attentive through untacking, waiting, and the return to the lobby until the Instructor directs the next step.

From start to finish, your consistency helps the rider feel safe, supported, and ready to participate.

Ground support should always be respectful, practical, and rider-specific

GROOMING

Support the rider with grooming in the way the Instructor directs. That may mean demonstrating a task, helping with hand-over-hand guidance, or simply staying nearby while the rider works independently.

TACK AND EQUIPMENT

Help carry, organize, and put away equipment when needed. Keep the process calm and efficient so the rider can stay focused on the lesson rather than the logistics around it.

LEADING AND TRANSITIONS

During walking transitions, mounting, dismounting, or moving between spaces, stay within arm's reach unless the Instructor gives a different direction.

PHONY PONY SUPPORT

When a rider uses the Phony Pony, assist with positioning, practice tasks, and confidence-building exactly as directed, while still allowing the rider to do as much as they can on their own.



GUIDING PRINCIPLE

Offer help that is calm, useful, and matched to the rider — never rushed, intrusive, or more than necessary.

Lesson format determines how the volunteer sidewalker fits into the team

Sidewalkers may support different services. Settings vary, but your role is always guided by the Instructor or therapist.

FORMAT 01

Group Adaptive Riding

Multiple riders share the arena, so volunteers watch spacing and group cues.

WHAT TO EXPECT

Help riders stay engaged while monitoring arena traffic and Instructor signals.

ROLE EMPHASIS

Team coordination and steady focus in a busier setting.

FORMAT 02

Private Adaptive Riding

One-on-one lessons allow closer attention and tailored pacing.

WHAT TO EXPECT

Support targeted tasks and follow moment-by-moment Instructor cues.

ROLE EMPHASIS

Precision and responsiveness to the rider's needs.

FORMAT 03

Therapy Services

Clinical goals guide volunteer tasks and specific handling instructions.

WHAT TO EXPECT

Follow precise directions for mounting, positioning, and safety aids.

ROLE EMPHASIS

Careful listening and exact follow-through on treatment guidance.

BOTTOM LINE

The sidewalker's role is assigned and clarified by the Instructor or therapist leading the session.



THANK YOU FOR SERVING

Your steady support helps Saddle Up! riders experience success

Thank you for stepping into this role with care, attention, and consistency. As a sidewalker, you help create a lesson environment where riders can feel secure enough to participate, learn, and grow.

MISSION IN PRACTICE

Every calm step beside the rider helps turn support into confidence.

Why this work matters: steady support helps create moments of confidence, trust, and success for every rider Saddle Up! serves.

As you begin: stay attentive, follow the Instructor's lead, and remember that your steady presence can make the difference between simply completing a lesson and helping a rider truly succeed.