

How to be a Sidewalker



Our riders in the Reins of Hope program need help to maintain their balance while sitting on the horse as they are riding. The sidewalker's job is to give the rider as much help in maintaining his or her balance on the horse as is needed. They also relay the instructor's directions using verbal or physical assistance. One or two people may be asked to act as sidewalkers for a rider, depending on how much difficulty he or she is having with balance.

How to Sidewalk With a Rider

In order to be in the best position to assist a rider in maintaining his or her balance, the sidewalker should walk next to the mounted rider, staying even with the center of the saddle.

The sidewalker maintains a position next to the mounted rider, remains even with the center of the saddle in order to increase the rider's confidence and to ensure his or her safety. If the rider should become unbalanced, the sidewalker would be there to help him or her to regain balance and stay in the saddle. The instructor may also ask the sidewalker to assist the rider in developing a good riding position by supporting a foot, stabilizing an ankle, or assisting in other ways.

The sidewalker places the fingers of the hand on the arm closest to the rider under the knee roll of the saddle and allows the forearm to rest lightly on the rider's thigh.

SAFETY RULE #1: Do not walk behind the saddle next to the horse's hindquarters!

SAFETY RULE #2: Do not lean on the rider or the horse!

SAFETY RULE #3: The sidewalker must remain alert to the needs of the rider!

Note: If the rider needs special assistance, the instructor will provide specific directions on how to provide the necessary support.

Sidewalking During the Riding Lesson

At the Mounting Ramp

If you are assisting a rider who mounts from the ramp, the instructor will give you specific directions on how to help with the mounting of that particular rider.

Mounting from the Ground

If you are assisting a rider who mounts from the ground or mounting block, the instructor may ask you to counterweight the saddle on the off-side as the rider mounts, in order to keep it from slipping when the rider places his or her weight in the stirrup to mount. It is the instructor's responsibility to assist the rider with mounting. Do not allow the rider to try to mount without the supervision from the instructor unless specifically directed to do so. Once the rider is mounted, the instructor will tell you what kind of assistance he or she will most probably need (for example, constant support, occasional support or reinforced directions.)

How Much to Help

The amount of help the rider will need will depend upon his or her experience with riding and the characteristics of the disability he or she has. Each rider should be permitted to be as independent as possible as long as his or her safety is not in jeopardy. The rider's attention should be focused on the instructor's directions and the task at hand. The sidewalker may need to reinforce the directions when the rider does not hear or understand them. Do not engage in casual conversation with the rider during the lesson. It distracts his or her attention and makes it difficult to hear the instructor.

Riders often have various physical limitations. Therefore, the sidewalker should not handle the rider (as attempting to change the position of his or her hand, arm, leg or other parts of the body) unless specifically asked to do so by the instructor.

At the Halt

Remain in position next to the rider and listen for directions from the instructor. Be especially alert for balance changes as the mount stops and starts.

At the Walk

Remain in position next to the rider and listen for directions from the instructor. If the rider needs special attention (such as repositioning in the saddle or having his or her foot replaced in the stirrup), alert the instructor and the leader working with the horse. It is usually best to go to the center of the ring to make any necessary adjustment in order to avoid interrupting the rest of the class.

At the Trot

The rider should ask the horse to trot only when told to do so by the instructor and only after the rider is fully prepared (holding the handhold, seat deep in the saddle and so forth.) The instructor may take the sidewalker's place for a short time when asking the rider to trot in order to work with him or her on a one on one basis to develop the skill. When assisting a rider at a trot, be especially alert for changes in balance caused by both the upward and downward transition.

During Exercises

Remain next to the rider and be ready to reinforce the instructor's directions as necessary. Enthusiasm is catching, so encourage the rider to participate independently as is safely possible.

Dismounting

The instructor is responsible for dismounting all riders. Remain next to the rider until the instructor is ready to help him or her dismount. Do not dismount the rider without the instructor.

Working With a Leader

Riders who require the assistance of one or more sidewalkers most often need a leader to assist them with guiding and controlling the horse or pony. The leader is responsible for the horse and the sidewalker for the rider. By working together they allow the rider to learn riding skills in safety. Riders often progress from needing three helpers to not needing any. Sidewalkers need to keep the leader informed of any special needs the rider may have. However, casual conversation between leaders and sidewalkers only serves to distract everyone's attention from the lesson and should not take place in the ring.

Terms You Should Know

Thigh Hold – sidewalker forearm placed over the thigh between knee and the hip of the rider for the duration of the lesson.

Thigh Hold at the Trot – rider has advanced and needs this assistance only at the trot.

Heel Hold – place hand on back of rider footwear, encouraging the rider to stretch heel down and discourage the rider from squeezing the horse's sides.

Hand over Hand – sidewalker A and/or sidewalker B holds their hand over hand of rider to assist in the control of steering and stopping the horse.

Verbal Assist – sidewalker A communicates the instructor's directions to the riders.

Leader at the Trot – Leader needed at trot only. Rider is independent at walk.

Floater – Rider is on lead at exercises, then taken off lead but leader stays with rider for support and assistance.

Spotter – Rider is on lead during exercises, then taken off lead. Leader goes to designated area and is standing by in case assistance is needed.

In Case of Emergency:

Occasionally a rider will fall off the horse or have a problem that requires special attention. If such an emergency occurs, the leader will stop the horse immediately and the instructor will take care of the rider involved. All other riders in the class will halt and sidewalkers must remain calm and keep their riders from becoming overly excited while waiting for directions from the instructor.