

# VOLUNTEER HANDBOOK



## Foothills Therapeutic Riding Association

### **OUR MISSION:**

To offer fun and safe equestrian learning experiences to special needs students that contribute to their physical, neurological, social and emotional development.

**P.O. Box 855  
Okotoks, AB T1S 1A9**

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**Phone: 403-995-1030**

**email: [FTRA@shaw.ca](mailto:FTRA@shaw.ca)**

**[foothillstherapeuticriding.com](http://foothillstherapeuticriding.com)**

## WELCOME

Our program runs because of a terrific team of volunteers like you! Without your generous contributions of time, enthusiasm and energy we wouldn't be able to operate.

Being a therapeutic riding volunteer is tremendously satisfying and very worthwhile. Everyone is encouraged to become involved.

All you really need to be involved as a volunteer is:

- a desire to help out riders in this unique way
- the ability to walk and occasionally jog on uneven ground, throughout a 60 min. session
- a pair of comfortable, close-toed shoes and safe clothing for the arena

You will choose a role to fulfill during the sessions. Other volunteers will assist you with learning these roles and there are outlines further on in this booklet to assist you as well.

We are counting on your attendance to make our program run smoothly but, if for any reason you are not able to attend a session, please let our volunteer coordinator know ASAP. We can make alternate arrangements.

If there is inclement weather you will receive an e-mail to confirm session cancellation.

Student attendance is unpredictable and can sometimes result in an excess of volunteers throughout the day. Volunteers can use this bonus time in a variety of ways:

- Grab a cup of coffee and join the cheering section in the stands to cheer on the students
- Join the instructors in the center ring to learn more about horse management and student safety
- Read through our resource materials to learn more about the variety of the conditions that our students are learning to live with

## **WHY WHAT YOU DO IS SO IMPORTANT**

Therapeutic riding is an activity designed to help individuals with a wide range of special needs experience the physical, neurological, social and emotional rewards from horseback riding.

Riding on a horse gently and rhythmically moves the rider's trunk and pelvis in a manner similar to that of the human walk. This consistent movement results in the improvement of coordination, balance, flexibility, strength and control.

For persons with learning disabilities or neurodegenerative conditions, the sensory and intellectual challenges encountered in their therapeutic riding experience help with neurological rehabilitation.

Persons dealing with emotional and social challenges are able to develop new skills and strategies through their relationship with the horse. These strategies, supported by volunteers, result in higher levels of independence and confidence.

The riders in our program have a very wide range of ability/skill levels and all do something different in the arena. Each rider receives concentrated, individual attention resulting in the best experience possible.

### **Therapeutic Riding is fun!**

For many students it is a true highlight in a day full of struggles. You make that possible.

## YOUR ROLE

Every student who attends our program is supported by a team of volunteers. The team consists of a Team Captain, a Horse Leader and a Side Walker (sometimes two side walkers). Each team member has a specific role but all members join in the support and care and safety of the rider.

When you arrive each week, sign in with the volunteer coordinator and put on your name tag. Check which team you are assigned to that week.

### THE TEAM CAPTAIN

The team captain ensures that the student and the team have a safe experience that aligns with the goals set out for that student.

1. Gather the team and familiarize everyone with the "student card" that outlines the goals that have been set out for the student.
2. Greet the student in the student waiting area and introduce yourself. Assess how the student is feeling that day by talking with the school representative. Check for proper attire and introduce the rest of the team if necessary.
3. Along with the rest of the team, accompany the student into the arena (central arena only). Assist with putting on helmet, boots and safety belt. Check for proper fit.  
*note: A properly fitting helmet should rest one inch above the eyebrows and the chinstrap should be tight enough not to be pulled over the chin. It should fit snugly but without creating pressure or being uncomfortable.*
4. Guide the student and the team through the grooming and tacking process.
5. Lead the student and the team safely to the arena to be mounted by the instructors.

6. Conduct the Student Activity Plan , leading and including the team. Verbally project instructions so the rest of the team can hear and respond in harmony.
7. Guide the student and the team in the grooming and putting away of materials at the end of the session and lead the student safely back to the lobby.
8. Gather input from all team members and coordinate the writing of notes about the session.

## **THE HORSE LEADER**

The leader should be someone who has experience handling horses.

The role of the horse leader is to control the horse and keep the experience safe.

1. Approach the horse first, assess his general attitude and body language while checking the halter and lead rope. Assist with grooming and tacking procedures.
2. After your rider has been mounted check with the side-walkers and rider before walking on. Listening for instructions and cues from the team leader.
3. When passing obstacles or going through openings, make sure you have left room for the horse, the rider's legs and the volunteers who may be walking alongside. Sharp turns should be avoided, as this is when a rider is most likely to be put off balance.
4. Two horse lengths should be left between horses. The horse leader should be ready to circle or cut across to the other side of the arena to avoid traffic jams.
5. The horse leader should try to develop the ability to be conscious of what is happening in the arena (the direction the horses are moving in the arena) and be aware at all times of the riders' needs.

6. The leader should walk just behind the horse's head. The right hand should be 6-8 inches from the halter with the extra rope FOLDED in the left hand.
7. The horse should be encouraged to go forward by the voice commands "walk on", "cluck" or "kiss". Once the horse is moving try to maintain an even pace and don't pull on the lead rope.
8. Let the rider give the aids first, and if his aids are not strong enough then reinforce the rider's cues by coaxing the horse along.
9. At all times, but particularly when trotting and during games, try not to get so enthusiastic that you forget your rider's position in the saddle and **be prepared to stop** if the rider appears unbalanced or if you are asked to stop by the side walkers or the instructors.
10. When the riders are doing exercises and the horse is stopped it is the leader's job to see that the horse stands still and is standing squarely on all four legs. Stand to the left of the horse facing your rider during exercises.

## THE SIDE WALKER

The side walker's primary responsibility is to ensure the safety of the rider and to communicate any safety issues to the rest of the team.

1. Your job may involve both physical and moral support. The team leader will give guidance as to how much support the rider needs.
2. Encourage the rider to use his own balance but the team leader may ask you to support the rider's thigh or heel. If he is sitting crooked encourage him to correct himself. If the rider cannot regain his balance, the side walker opposite may ease him back into the saddle. Be prepared to use the safety belt if necessary.

3. The side walkers are responsible for seeing that the rider continues to carry out the team leader's directions regarding positions of seat, hands, legs, etc.
4. When the rider is doing exercises or games, the side walker should check the rider's leg position to ensure that he does not lose his balance.
5. Chatting with the other volunteers will create a major distraction for all those involved. Talk to the rider by all means during the "loosening up" period at the beginning of the ride but not when the rider should be listening to the team leader. The focus of talk should be on the rider and what they are doing during the time in the arena.
6. Some riders with a disability are capable of riding without a lead rope as determined by the instructors. All team members maintain close supervision.
7. Some of the riders need help with the "Hand over Hand" Method (place your hand over the student's hand to guide them in the activity). This will enable the rider to learn the skill faster. Perseverance and repetition with lots of encouragement will spell the road to success.
8. Resist the temptation to prevent the student from struggling. Helping too soon or too often unintentionally gives the message that the student is helpless or not able. It is important to remember that the rider will only improve at a task if he is allowed to practice-practice-practice. You will boost his confidence by standing by him as he completes the task at his own pace.

## **PROCEDURES**

Those who are at the arena first thing please chip in and help with chores

- set up snack and greeting tables
- set out tie ropes and make sure the saddling area is clean
- set out mounting boxes, cones and other "props"

- help to lay out brushes, blankets, cinches, reins etc.
- Groom horses. Check for any injury, illness or “behavioral problems” and notify the instructor of the same

### **1. Tack Routine:**

- Try to be in and out as efficiently as possible
- All gear must FIT
- Boots: round toes preferred, size close
- Helmet: ½ inch finger slack- strap snug- it should not slide around
- Belt: snug over whatever clothing the rider is wearing
- Saddle: use the saddle that has been designated – see the white board. The saddle must be comfortable for the horse and the rider. Check with the instructor if unsure
- Pick up brush pail, blanket, cinch and reins. These are specific to the horse you are using and should be used only with that horse

### **2. Saddling Routine:**

- As your team enters the horse area, be alert! Everyone say "hello (horse's name)" or "coming around" and place a hand on the horse when walking behind any horse at close range. Go directly to your designated horse.
- Hang or set gear to the horse's left side- saddle on fence with horn to left looking from inside. Give the rider a little time to say hello to the horse and to visit with team members, then ask him to pick up the correct tool from the bucket and get grooming- scratch first, then brush, head to tail, top to bottom. Remember "coming around" and hand on. Then the other side.



- **Do not ever** walk between a horse and anything they are tied to.
- Tools go back in the pail close to the fence, to the horse's left.
- Blanket is placed well ahead of the withers and slide into position. Always move back to lay hair if pulled forward.
- Saddle will be placed gently so that the blanket is slightly ahead of center. Make a tunnel.
- Cinch is buckled on the off (right) side first; center in middle. Do not tighten the cinch.
- Latigo (near/left side) runs through the cinch rings, through the rigging ring (on saddle), through the cinch ring again and buckles- just barely snug.
- Reins are snapped gently to bit or halter side rings so that "tail" points out, away from the horse's cheek.

### **3. Leading:**

- Be sure the horse has a shank snapped securely to the bottom ring of the halter.
- Have the shank in the hand of whoever will lead the horse before quietly unsnapping the tie rope.
- The horse will be led from the left side: Two hands are used on shank with the right "leading" hand about a forearm's length from the snap and remaining rope is folded (not coiled) in the left hand.
- If a rider is weak or unsteady, the horse leader should be between the horse and the rider so that if the rider

falls they won't fall under the horse. A support person may walk ahead of, behind or to the left side of the rider. Other team members should walk well ahead.

- Proceed to arena, being cautious of other teams. Once there, if all are ready and the instructor is available to help mount, proceed to stairs, box or suitable area. A stop will be made for the instructor to tighten cinch and check stirrups.
- If no one is available to help your rider mount their horse, work on leading, colours, parts of a horse or tack, or discuss various things that horses can do. (Pick a safe spot and have all team members close and participating but only one at a time talking)

#### **4. Mounting/Dismounting:**

All mounting/dismounting is done in the arena by the two riding Instructors.

- Lead horse back to the same tie-rope and reverse tacking, grooming, and tack-area procedures. Make sure student is re-united with class, care-giver, parent, etc..

### **TIPS**

“To control a horse one must first learn to control oneself”-  
Mary Longden, Coaching with Courage.

1. Treat each student as an individual. Everyone has likes and dislikes, hobbies and activities they are interested in. Ask about them. Even if the individual is nonverbal they will appreciate being treated like a verbal person. Many of the riders, although nonverbal, can communicate in other ways.
2. Promote success. Encourage the student to complete the tasks asked of him. Being able to groom and tack his horse is a big success, even if it takes some extra time.

Memory, coordination, self-esteem, and muscles are built by carrying the blanket, saddle, reaching for toys etc. The biggest muscle exercised during riding is the smile.

3. Assist the rider to feel fully engaged. Through activities and conversation, support the notion that he is fully responsible for the care of his horse and equipment. Let him know that you are there for support only then step back as much as you can. Always refer to the horse as his. It is his sense of control over the learning that allows him to internalize his success and make it meaningful. It is only then that true self-esteem and confidence can improve.
4. Every student is assisted according to their individual capabilities and expectations are established on an individual basis. What is acceptable for one student may not be for another. The team leader will inform you of the behaviors and goals for your student.
5. When working with students do not ask them what they want to do, but rather instruct them to do the task at hand, eg. " Johnny, lead your horse into the arena"...not "Johnny, would you like to lead your horse into the arena?". If you ask someone they can always say no which leaves you in the position of having to deny their choice.
6. Non-compliance is an issue that can arise, especially if the student is feeling anxious. When this issue arises, the instructor, instructor's assistant and the student coordinator consult with the school representative to resolve it. Please bring it to their attention.
7. Please be sensitive to the confidentiality that all riders and their families are expecting. We certainly want to share our successes with others but please do not use riders' names when discussing our sessions. **Any and all personal information needs to be kept confidential to respect their privacy.**

The most important thing to remember is to **HAVE FUN BE SAFE** and enjoy yourself. If you have any suggestions, games, or ideas to help make riding a more enjoyable experience please let the instructor know.

## **PROGRAM BASICS**

### **BODY POSITION is achieved by:**

1. Rider's seat in deepest part of saddle seat.
2. Back straight but relaxed.
3. Hands on reins with thumbs up, reins running from horse up through hands.
4. Knees slightly bent, lower leg hanging straight, toes pointing forward and slightly up.

### **FORWARD MOVEMENT is achieved by:**

1. Voice command of a "kiss" or "walk on"
2. A slight lifting of the weight
3. A gentle squeeze with the lower leg
4. Encouragement from a coach or volunteer
5. Hands toward the horse's ears.

### **TURNS are achieved by:**

1. Drawing the inside rein back and slightly in to the turn
2. The outside rein toward the horse's ear  
The reins may need to be shortened.

### **HALT is achieved by:**

1. Say "whoa" while drawing both reins back with increasing pressure until the horse stops
2. Relax the reins.
3. Repeat if the horse moves on. **REMEMBER:** Don't give the horse signals unless you want him to do something that he is not.

## **COMMUNICATION**

If a student's ability to speak is limited:

- ❖ Allow for longer periods of time of processing time. Very often he will attempt an answer if he is not rushed.
- ❖ Encourage and provide an immediate reward for all verbal responses.
- ❖ Pair a verbal response with a visual cue if possible.
- ❖ Ask for assistance for specific ideas or strategies.

If a student is non-verbal:

- ❖ Establish eye contact before communicating.
- ❖ Give an immediate reward for any attempt at a sound.
- ❖ The school or family may provide hand signals.
- ❖ Use visual cues when communicating.
- ❖ Place less emphasis on communicating and more on riding.
- ❖ Ask for assistance for specific ideas or strategies.

When students have challenges with verbal language you must place closer attention to their non-verbal messages. Very often they could be speaking volumes about how they feel and whether they feel done for the day. You just need to watch closely.

## **STRETCHING AND BALANCE**

The students in our program have conditions that are affected by a wide variety of internal and external factors. Environmental factors such as light, heat, dust and sound we can easily adjust. Internal factors such as stress, fatigue and excitement require planned strategies.

One way to address internal imbalance is through endorphin release from exercise and stretching. Endorphins are released during stretching exercises and promote feelings of well being. Stretching improves circulation and reduces cortisol levels.

Feeling good and at ease contributes to the success of their program. There are a variety of stretching exercises you can do on a horse, which will be demonstrated to you.

Balance is a critical component of physical and neurological development. All of our students benefit from activities that promote balance skills. Try arm and rotation exercises at a stop first, and then when the horse is in motion. Begin to include various speeds, levels of positioning, and directions as an interesting challenge. If the student is ready, attempt these same maneuvers with closed eyes. Ensure that the student is secure with a horse leader and side walker.

Many of our students have issues with anxiety. While initiating new activities or exercises be mindful of their comfort zones. When they know that they can trust you to respect their limits, they often will feel safe to move toward a higher level of ability.

If you have any questions or concerns the instructor and instructor assistants are there to help you.

## **EMERGENCY PROCEDURES**

In the very rare event of an arena emergency each person has a role.

The program instructors will take charge in the event of an emergency and assign duties to volunteers in the arena as required such as phoning 911 or retrieving the first aid kit or the AED. The first aid Kit is located in the trailer and the AED is in the arena clearly marked at the north entrance. Volunteers should familiarize themselves with the emergency dismount which will be reviewed and demonstrated at orientation and/or the start of each session.

If a rider falls off a horse: the instructors will attend to the rider and provide direction to the team of that rider. All other Team Captains and Side Walkers are responsible for their rider's safety and will direct the Horse Leader to lead his horse and rider to the

arena rails as quickly and safely as possible. Wait there for further instructions.

If a horse gets away from a team: the instructors and the Horse Leader are responsible for the horse and the Team Captain and Side Walker are responsible for ensuring the rider is safe. All other Team Captains and Side Walkers are responsible for their child's safety and will direct the Horse Leader to lead their horse and rider to the arena rails as quickly and safely as possible. Wait there for further instructions.

If the arena must be evacuated (fire):at the direction of the instructors all Team Captains and Side Walkers will dismount their rider and leave the arena by the nearest safe exit to meet at the muster station in the parking lot. The horse leaders are responsible for leading their horses out of the arena and to a designated safe area outside the arena.

It is the Team Captain's responsibility with the instructors and Student Coordinator to ensure a proper incident report is completed and any notifications are made.

# THANK YOU

Thank you, volunteers, for donating your time to these very special riders. The success of this whole program totally depends on you and others like you. Although it may not be said often enough please know that you are a true treasure and are very appreciated. You can see it in the progress that the riders are making, in how smoothly the program runs and the big smiles on the kids' faces

## **Volunteer or Donate:**

- New volunteers are always welcome.
- Loan us your suitable horse.
- Cash donations are very much appreciated and they help us to keep our program running

## **Donate today and receive a tax receipt in the mail**

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*This handbook has been created to provide:*

- *an introduction to the FTRA process and its benefits*
- *outlines of the roles and responsibilities of Volunteers*

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