

Effective Sidewalking

By Susan Tucker and Molly Lingua, RPT

Sidewalkers usually get the most hands-on duties in therapeutic riding. They are directly responsible for the rider. As such, they have the capability to either enhance or detract from the lesson. In the arena, the sidewalker should help the student focus his attention on the instructor. Try to avoid unnecessary talking with either the rider or other volunteers. Too much input from too many directions is very confusing to anyone, and to riders, who already have perceptual problems, it can be overwhelming. If two sidewalkers are working with one student, one should be the designated talker.

When the instructor gives a direction, allow your student plenty of time to process it. If the instructor says "Turn to the right, toward me," and the student seems confused, gently tap the right hand and say, "Right," to reinforce the command. You will get to know the riders and learn when they need help and when they're just not paying attention.

It's important to maintain a position by the rider's knee. Being too far forward or back will make it very difficult to assist with instructions or provide security if the horse should trip or shy.

There are two ways to hold onto the rider without interfering. The most commonly used is the arm-over-the-thigh hold. the sidewalker grips

the front of the saddle (flap or pommel depending on the horse's size) with the hand closest to the rider. Then the fleshy part of the forearm rests gently on the rider's thigh. Be careful that the

elbow doesn't accidentally dig into the rider's leg.

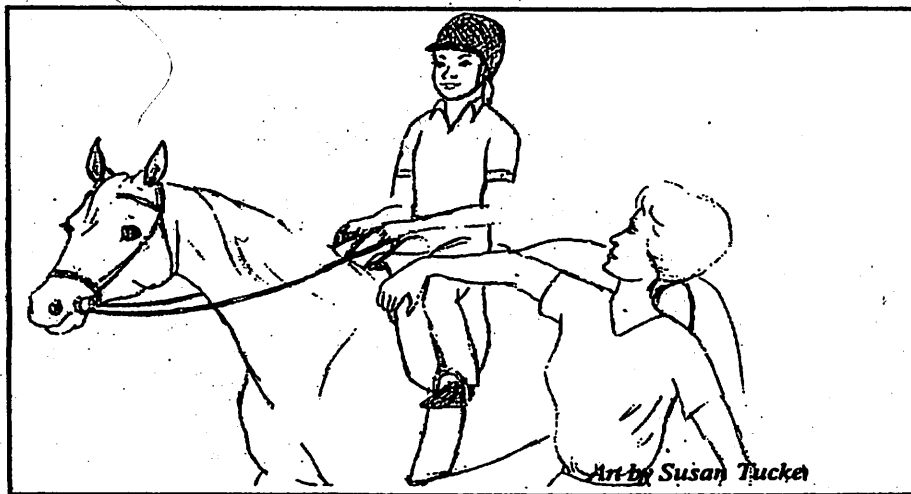
Sometimes pressure on the thigh can increase or cause muscle spasticity, especially for riders with cerebral palsy.

In this case, the

therapeutic hold may be used. Here, the leg is held at the joints, usually the knee or ankle. Check with the instructor or therapist for the best way to assist. In the (unlikely) event of an emergency, the arm-over-the-thigh hold is the most secure.

Avoid wrapping an arm around the rider's waist. It is tempting, especially when walking beside a pony with a young or small rider, but it can offer too much and uneven support. At times, it can even pull the rider off balance and make riding more difficult. Encourage your student to use his own trunk muscles to the best of his abilities.

If the instructor chooses to use a transfer belt on your rider, be very careful not to pull down or push up on it. As your arm tires it's hard to avoid this, so rather than grip the handle firmly, just touch your thumb and finger together around it. This puts you in position to assist the rider if needed, but you will neither give unneeded support nor pull him off balance. When you are



ready for relief for your arm, ask the leader to move into the center to stop. Then trade sides, one at a time, with the other sidewalker. If the rider has serious balance problems that warrant a transfer belt, two sidewalkers should be used.

During exercises, pay attention to the student. Sometimes volunteers forget that the riders are to do the exercises and the sidewalkers are to

reinforce and assist. The same applies to games. Don't get so competitive that your rider doesn't get to use his skills because you do it for him in an effort to win.

The ultimate goal for therapeutic riding is to encourage the rider to stretch and grow. You are right at his side, so help the instructor to challenge him to the best of his ability.

Safety Belts

At one time in therapeutic riding, each new rider received a belt to wear during a lesson. The original purpose of the belt was to have something for the volunteer to grab (instead of the rider's clothing) in case of emergency or to help stabilize a rider with poor balance.

However, we have discovered how detrimental the weight of a volunteer's arm can be when it is attached to a belt. Therefore, try to wean your riders away from belts whenever possible. If the

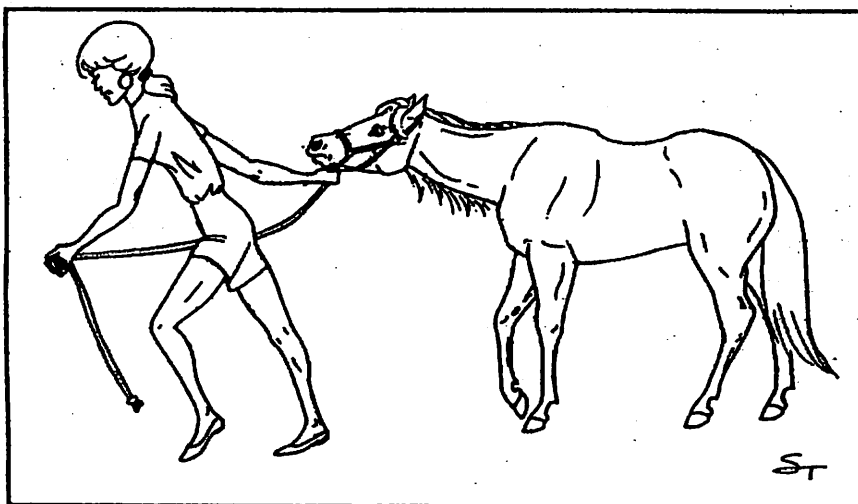
rider feels more secure with the belt on, instruct the sidewalker to use it only in emergencies.

Replacing the safety belt is the "arm-over-the-thigh" hold. The sidewalker grips the front of the saddle (flap or pommel depending on the horse's size) with the hand closest to the rider. The forearm rests gently on the rider's thigh. The sidewalker should be careful that his elbow doesn't accidentally dig into the rider's leg.

The Role of the Leader

By Susan F. Tucker

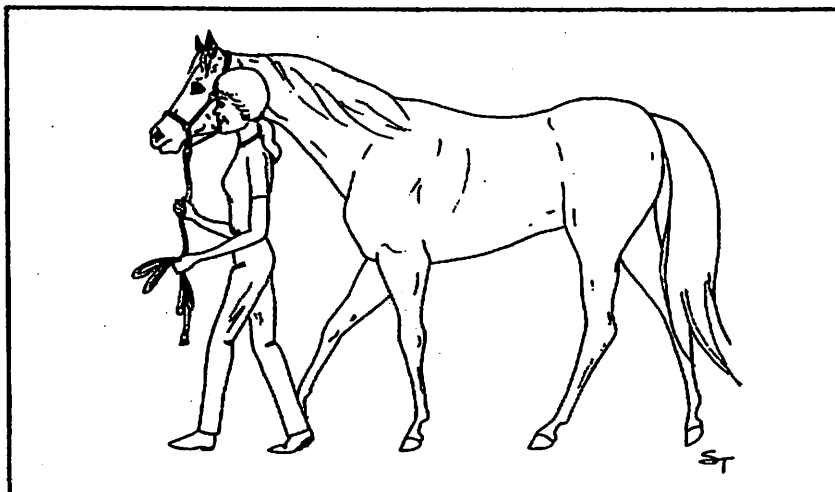
One of the most challenging duties that can be assigned to a volunteer is that of leader. A leader's first responsibility is the horse but he must also consider the sidewalkers, making sure there is enough room along the fence and around obstacles for them to pass.



An effective leader pays close attention to the rider's needs as well as to where the horse is going. This reinforces the rider's attempts to control the horse. However, you should not execute an instruction for the rider before he has time to process the information and make an effort to comply. Sometimes it may be appropriate to walk into the corner and stand until the student figures out what to do.

Avoid the temptation to talk to the rider or sidewalkers. A rider may get confused by too much input and not know who's in charge. (Instructors often make terrible leaders because they can't keep their mouths shut!)

Figure A depicts a few faults common among leaders. Here is a leader grimly marching along-head



down, one hand on the lead snap, the other inside the coiled end of the rope-dragging a strung-out horse. In a battle with a horse, you lose. You must get the horse to cooperate. Walk along side the horse, about even with his eye. This helps keep him in a proper frame, which is more beneficial for everyone.

Talk to the horse; most of them know whoa, walk and trot, or can learn the words. Watch where you're going and what's happening around you. Do not walk backward to look at the rider. It's dangerous for everyone and the horse isn't eager to follow someone who can't see where he is going.

Figure B shows the correct position for leaders. The lead shank is held with the right hand 6 to 12 inches from the snap, allowing free motion of the horse's head. This is more therapeutic to the rider and less irritating to the horse. The tail end of the lead should be looped in a figure-eight in the left hand to avoid tripping on it. Never coil the rope around your hand. That could end a close relationship with your fingers!

Use short tugs rather than a steady pull to keep a lazy horse moving. The horse can set himself against a steady pull, but tugs keep him awake. Move out, about 1,000 steps per 15 minutes, to provide the most therapeutic benefit.

When you halt for more than a few seconds, stand in front of the horse with your hands on the halter's cheek pieces (if the horse permits), or loosely hold the lead or reins. Standing in front is a psychological barrier for the horse and he will stand more quietly than if he has an easy chance to move out. If you like your thumbs, don't put them through the snaffle or halter rings.

If the worst happens and there is an accident, stay with the horse. There are other people to care for a fallen rider. The situation could easily become more dangerous if there are loose horses running around the arena. Move your horse as far from the fallen student as possible and keep calm. Listen for the instructor's directions.

These suggestions can help you control your horse, be a good aide to a rider and be a valuable assistant to an instructor. You will provide real therapeutic input to your rider, as well as make it safe for him to have fun riding.