



OPENING GAITS  
THERAPEUTIC RIDING SOCIETY

## Volunteer Manual



Volunteers don't get paid,  
not because they are worthless  
but because

**THEY ARE PRICELESS**

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Sherry Anderson

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## WELCOME!

To Our Wonderful Volunteers:

No therapeutic riding program could exist without the help of dedicated volunteers, and Opening Gaits is no exception. Since its incorporation in December of 1998, thousands of volunteer hours have been given to the program. What do volunteers receive for all this hard work? One volunteer summed it up, "Where can you go today where smiles grow wider each week and there is an endless supply of them?!" We couldn't have said it better ourselves!

Opening Gaits needs your support, and not just in the arena. We welcome your suggestions on fundraising events, better training methods for our volunteers, observations from working with our riders, and in any other area you believe OG can improve. We also love to hear why you choose to volunteer your valuable time with us and how we can make it so you never want to leave! Volunteers are the hub of OG, and we want to make sure you feel part of the vital role you play. Your feedback is important to us, as volunteers are the ones who spend the most one on one time with our riders. We couldn't do this without you!

This book is designed to help you become familiar with the OG program and assist you in your volunteer roles. Please read it carefully, as it is important to the rider as well as yourself, then come and join us in providing an amazing program for some amazing people! And remember that if you have a question, just ask. We are here help.

Thank you for being part of our team!

Sincerely,

All of us at Opening Gaits

THANK YOU.

Opening Gaits Office Line: 403.254.4184

[openinggaitsociety@gmail.com](mailto:openinggaitsociety@gmail.com)

### Classes

- **Wednesday Evening – All ages**
  - Instructor: Joy Jenson
  - Times: 6.00 – 7.00pm, 7.30 – 8.30pm
- **Fridays – Adults**
  - Instructor: Maria Badyk
  - Times: 10.30 – 11.30am, 12 Noon 1.00pm, 1.30 – 2.30pm
- **Satudays – All ages**
  - Instructor: Joy Jenson
  - Times: 10.30 – 11.30am, 12 Noon 1.00pm, 1.30 – 2.30pm

### Cancellations

#### Volunteer cancellations:

Please inform the Executive Director a week in a d v a n c e if you know you need to miss a class. In the event of sickness, please call, email or text at least two hours prior to class.

#### Class cancellations due to weather:

In the event of inclement weather -17 celcuis, a message will be left on OG's voicemail & Facebook will be updated indicating that classes have been cancelled for the day two hours prior to class. An email will also be sent at that time.

- **Safety & Dress**

Therapy horses are a special kind of horse, selected for their calm temperaments and high tolerance to noise, movements and distractions. However, no horse is totally “bomb-proof.” Please be aware of the unpredictable nature of the horses you are working around. The following tips should help you establish safe practices:

- **Moving Around a Horse**

Be aware of horses’ blind spots: under the neck, directly behind, under the belly, and about a foot directly in front of the face. Always approach a horse from the side, where he can see you clearly. Speak to him in a calm, low voice before touching him. Do not cross under a horse’s neck or under/over the lead rope he is tied with. Cross behind a tied horse close to his hindquarters with your hand on him the entire time so he is aware of your movement. If a horse is not tied, cross in front. Do not squat or kneel down when grooming a horse. Be aware of your surroundings and always leave yourself an “out.”

- **Catching/Leading a Horse**

NEVER GO ALONE when turning out or bringing in horses. Keep reins and lead ropes off the ground, and never wrap them around your hands/body or in loops that could be pulled tight. Approach the horse on the left side, not from behind, and speak to him before touching him. Always use a halter and lead rope when moving horses. Lead horses from the left side, your right hand approximately 6-12 inches from the clip and your left hand holding the end of the lead rope in a figure eight loop. Make sure that the slack between your hands is not below your knees (a tripping hazard). Walk beside a horse when leading, not in front of his head or behind his shoulder. If a horse pulls, DO NOT pull against him (which may frighten the horse). Speak in a calm voice to encourage the horse to stop backing. Do not engage in a “tug of war” with a horse. Be assertive, but not forceful or frightening. If a horse is reluctant to walk forward, ask him to step to the side (turn) and then resume your forward walk once he starts moving.

- **Working with a Rider Around a Horse**

Provide direct supervision (one on one, within arm’s reach) to riders while grooming, tacking, mounting or dismounting. Ensure that riders are following safety protocol, especially while on the ground around horses. Be mindful that children in particular are likely to go in a horse’s blind spots, such as under the neck. Directly them in how to safely move around a horse.

- **Tying a Horse**

Only tie by the halter with a lead rope, never by reins or anything attached to a bit/bridle. Tie only in designated places using a quick release knot (slip knot). Tying too short may cause a horse to panic and pull. Tying too long could cause a horse to step through the loop and injure himself.

- **Safe Attire**

Please wear closed-toe, closed-heel shoes (no slip-ons, sandals, crocs, etc.), preferably something sturdy like a hiking or riding boot. Long pants are recommended. Fitted shirts and jackets that can be done up so that nothing is loose or flapping. Dress in layers— the barn is heated but still chilly in winter months. We may take lessons outside, weather permitting, so please dress accordingly.

Long hair must be tied back. We recommend that you leave all jewelry (except wedding rings) at home as it may get caught on tack or potentially grabbed by a rider. Please silence cell phones and keep them put away during the lesson.

For the safety and well-being of the horses, riders, and volunteers in our program, standard procedures have been developed. Be sure you are familiar with these procedures and check with an instructor for clarification on any point you are unsure of.

Always remember that you will have students observing you. If you are an experienced equestrian, there are certain actions and shortcuts that you may be comfortable with and can perform safely, but that can potentially be hazardous to our students and less experienced volunteers. Be sure to always act with caution, for your actions may be imitated.

## Horse Leaders

The horse leader's main duty is to ensure the horse is under control at all times. The degree of assistance will depend on the rider and on the horse. We encourage the rider to be in control to the best of his/her ability and the horse leader assists when required. As the rider progresses, the assistance of the horse leader will decrease.

- **In an emergency: the leader's responsibility is to control the horse.** Bring the horse to a halt immediately. If your rider is down, move the horse a safe distance away and halt. Wait for the instructor's directions. Allow the instructor and side walkers to attend to the rider.
- Lead the horse from the left side (unless requested to change sides), positioning yourself between the horse's eye and shoulder.

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Pelvic Hold  
(Maximum Support)



Thigh Hold (Medium Support)



Knee Hold



Ankle Hold



Heel Hold  
(Minimum Support)



Toe Hold

- Keep both hands on the lead rope at all times. One should be approximately 6-12 inches from the clip, the other holding the end of the lead rope in a figure eight pattern. You may wish to wear gloves.
- Do not let the slack from the lead rope drop below your knees. Do not wrap the lead rope around your hand or body or in a loop that may pull tight. Do not put your fingers through rings in the halter.
- Wait to bring a horse into the mounting area until the instructor has requested it. Bring the horse as close as possible to the mounting ramp/block and ask the horse to stop square. Do not allow the horse to walk off until the instructor gives the command. While halted, stand by the horse's head at a 45-degree angle facing his shoulder. Beware that holding a horse's halter tightly may cause him to become anxious and move.
- During the lesson, be attentive to the instructor's directions. Limit discussion with side walkers to what pertains to the lesson.
- At the halt, stand facing the horse's shoulder at a 45-degree angle. Do not stand directly in front of the horse.



## Horse Leaders

- Lead at an even pace with gradual wide turns to avoid throwing a rider off balance. Plan your turns to allow room for side walkers to stay beside the rider and not brush them off on an obstacles. Communicate in advance changes in direction or pace to side walkers and the rider.
- Maintain a two-horse length distance from other horses at all times. Be aware of the other horses in the arena.
- Give riders time to process commands. Aid as little as necessary to maintain safety and continue with the flow of the lesson.
- Use verbal commands with the horse's name to initiate movement if the horse has not responded to the rider's attempts. Examples:
  - To walk: "1,2,3 walk on, Ami." Give the horse the opportunity to make the first step, then walk forward yourself. Look forward in the direction you are going, not at the horse. Once a horse walks, maintain a neutral position between shoulder and eye with some slack in the lead rope. Do not drag a slower horse around the arena. Ask the instructor for suggestions on how to achieve an active walk.
  - To halt: "3,2,1 whoa, Ami." Stop yourself, facing forward. Follow up by pulling the lead rope gently back toward the horse's chest. Relax tension as soon as the horse halts.
  - To trot: "1,2,3 trot, Ami." Give the horse the opportunity to transition, then jog beside him. If the horse is reluctant, command again, move forward and give light steady pressure. Release pressure as soon as the horse trots. You may slow an eager horse's trot by commanding in low voice, "Easy, Ami." Jog more slowly and pull back gently toward the horse's chest if they do not respond to a verbal cue. The same method is used to transition back to the walk, with the verbal command, "3, 2, 1 walk, Ami." **ONLY TROT WHEN REQUESTED BY THE INSTRUCTOR.** Be sure side walkers are prepared and have had time to give appropriate support holds if necessary.

## Side Walkers

The side walker's primary responsibility is to ensure the safety of the rider. The degree of assistance will depend on the balance and ability of the rider. Side walkers also assist the instructor by keeping the rider focused on tasks, explaining instructions, physically assisting the rider in doing a task (e.g., "hand over hand"), encouraging, socializing, correcting balance and body position and much more.

- **In an emergency: the side walker's responsibility is to stay with the rider.** Unless the instructor directs riders to be dismounted, keep your rider mounted. Immediately provide full support with a pelvic or thigh hold. If directed to dismount a rider, do so as quickly and safely as possible. Remove dismounted riders (unless injured) from the arena immediately and stay with them. Side walkers may be dismissed from a rider by the instructor to call 911.
- Introduce yourself to your rider and accompany him/her into the arena. Riders may not enter the arena unaccompanied. Ensure the rider is properly attired (boot with a small heel, long pants, jackets done up, helmet, transfer belt). Remain within arm's reach of a rider at all times.
- Riders may not mount until directed by the instructor. During mounting, follow the instructor's directions for assisting the rider. Feet are not put in stirrups at the ram. Provide full support (pelvic or thigh hold) from the time the rider gets on the horse until you halt in the middle of the arena for the start of class. The instructor will direct what support is needed for each rider after this point.
- The instructor will also adjust tack (stirrup length, girth) at this time. If you notice changes need to be made during the lesson, inform the instructor immediately.
- Walk at the rider's knee. Avoid leaning on the horse and keep hands free, not in your pockets. Inform the instructor if you need to stop for any reason (switch sides, tie a shoe, etc.). Do not leave your rider's side until someone has taken your place.
- Remember to be patient and give your rider time to process instructions. Break a task down into smaller steps or ask the instructor for suggestions on how to help your rider accomplish something.
- When correcting balance and positioning, let the rider try to correct it themselves first. If assistance is necessary, begin with legs, move up to hips, torso, and then shoulders. Be gentle and smooth, as some riders have very stiff joints.
- If a rider removes his/her helmet, immediately ask the horse leader to halt the horse and inform the instructor.

## Support Holds

Remember to keep your thumb tucked for all holds except heel.

## Points to remember

**Be patient.** Progress with some riders is measured in months and years. The degree of progress is not a reflection on the team of volunteers or instructors; it is a function of the disability and may depend on the motivation of the rider. Most riders need to try a task multiple times before succeeding, and some tasks must be broken down into much smaller skills in order to be mastered.

**Be positive.** Have a great attitude and use lots of positive words. Remember that failure is OK—we all do things incorrectly when learning a new skill—and should be met with encouragement and “Try again!” Please refrain from any critical or negative comments about riders, horses, instructors or volunteers, especially in the presence of riders. Please bring concerns directly to instructors or the Executive Director.

**Be attentive.** Use safe practices all the time. Inattention and *over* confidence cause accidents to happen. A relaxed, attentive, and confident volunteer helps a rider be relaxed, attentive and confident, too.

**Be respectful.** Treat each rider, regardless of disability, in a friendly and respectful manner and expect appropriate behavior in return. Address questions and conversation to the riders if it concerns them. First give the rider the opportunity to speak and make decisions. Caregivers, parents, and/or instructors will provide additional information where necessary.

**Be inquisitive.** Read and understand safety and emergency procedures. Ask questions if there is any aspect of the program you do not understand. No question is foolish or insignificant. If you would like to pursue therapeutic riding further, training is available.

**Be honest.** If you are not happy with your volunteer assignment or are having difficulty, please tell us. We would like you to derive satisfaction from your work. We value your time, dedication and enthusiasm

## Benefits of therapeutic riding

The rhythmic side-to-side, forward and backward movement of the horse mimics the human gait, moving a rider's pelvis and torso in the same motion as walking. This stimulation gently relaxes taut muscles and improves core strength, balance, and coordination. Learning new routines assists individuals who otherwise may experience difficulty with these tasks. Interacting with volunteers, other riders, instructors and the horses improves social skills.

Being able to participate in an activity like other able-bodied friends and family increases confidence. Lastly, the real success of therapeutic riding comes from most riders being highly motivated to learn new skills, simply because they genuinely enjoy riding!

**Body Localization and Abstraction**—By locating and identifying parts of the horse's body, a rider develops an understanding of his/her own body and in turn can transfer this to others.

**Muscular Strength and Coordination**—By performing physical tasks of increasing difficulty astride a walking horse, riders with decreased muscle tone gain strength while riders with spastic muscles experience a normalization of muscle tone. Both aid in creating better coordination.

**Balance and Rhythm**—A rider is continuously involved in interpreting and reacting to the horse's movements, helping to improve muscle control, gross and fine motor skills and overall balance.

**Directionality and Laterality**—Riders develop the ability to know and respond to right, left, up, down, forward and backward. Activities focusing on directing the horse toward a specific location are used to aid the student in developing spatial relationships.

**Visual Acuity**—Activities that require the student to direct and move his/her horse around or through objects develop the ability to see objects in the rider's field of vision and differentiate them meaningfully and accurately.

**Anticipatory Response and Impulse Control**—A rider develops the ability to anticipate the probable outcome of his/her behavior with the horse, both positively and negatively. This aids the rider in predicting the consequences of his/her own behavior and that of others in a given situation. It also helps the rider to control impulsive behavior, as thoughtful intentional actions are met with positive reinforcement (ex. calmly saying "Walk on" causes the horse to walk forward) while impulsive behavior is met with consequences (ex. removing a helmet stops the ride).

## Human First Aid

- Human first aid kit is in the Office.
- 911 calls
  - Instructors and equine manager carry cell phones in case of emergency. You may also use your personal cell phone.
  - Opening Gaits, Bar None Ranches, 322133 Hwy 552 West, De Winton, AB, ToLoXo

## Horse First Aid

- Horse first aid kit is located in the supply room.
- Please immediately inform instructors/ and equine manager of any injuries.
- Runaway/loose horse: do not chase it. Inform the instructor.

## Evacuation/Fire Procedure

- The instructor will delegate the procedure that is to be taken. Follow their instructions immediately. The muster point is the parking lot.

## Incident Report Forms

- An incident report form must be completed for all incidents (no matter how small), even if the person does not seem to be hurt at the time. The instructor must review and sign the form after it has been completed and will submit it.
- Forms are located in the office or can be requested from the instructor.
- Please note the Bar None Ranches offices have landlines, if the cell service is patchy.