

## **Encouraging Independence: Tips for Teaching Blind Riders**

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*'No otherwise qualified blind person should be denied benefits of, or participation in, any horse related activity*

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The lesson goals of all NARHA riding instructors should be to encourage blind riders (as well as most other riders) to develop horsemanship skills and explore the maximum level of independence. The key to good riding instruction lies in safely challenging each rider and to always set goals that are attainable, but just out of reach of the rider's current level of ability.

### **Behaviors that Prohibit:**

Riding unassisted in an enclosed area, riding at faster gaits, participating in horse care unassisted often is denied to the rider who is blind for assumed safety reasons. Often such overprotection can be traced back to unfamiliarity with individuals who are visually impaired. The instructor is afraid the rider may be injured. As a result, the rider is restricted with permanent sidewalkers, horse leaders and other protective measures. In response, the rider may plateau at a certain level of equestrian skill. Instructors must recognize that activities that carry a greater risk may be uncomfortable to them at the outset, but that proper levels of supervision can ensure reasonable safety. Discussing activities before the lesson and debriefing afterward, both with blind children and adults, is a highly effective technique to speed progress.

### **Policies that Discourage:**

Rules should not limit skill development and must consider the goals of the individual rider. All NARHA centers have certain policies that are impervious, such as wearing a helmet. But the blind rider who is otherwise able bodied must be offered a road for progression in a different manner than riders with other disabilities. For example, sidewalkers should be removed from a blind rider as soon as the basic horsemanship skills have been mastered. Many NARHA riders should be encouraged to compete in the show ring, to ride horses at a public hack stable while on vacation, or to eventually own their own horses and even farms. All of these equestrian options are perfectly suited to the blind rider who

enthusiastically pursues horses and riding. A serious review of how center policies stimulate or thwart equestrian skills development is especially important for the rider who is blind.

### **Negative Messages:**

Suggesting to the blind student, especially a child, that a task is out of reach often can become a self-fulfilling prophecy. A rider who happens to be blind will often have the same fears and apprehensions of riding that a sighted student may possess. This is normal and not related to the absence of sight. The challenge is to encourage the rider past this appropriate fear and not plant negative messages along the way.

### **Basic Considerations:**

- The overriding challenge for the blind rider is spatial orientation. Provide reliable sound cues or reference points in the arena.
- Some blind riders possess potential beyond the experience of a riding instructor or the services a NARHA center. It may be necessary to develop a “progression path” for such an equestrian that may transition them from the NARHA center into an even more challenging situation.
- Help an independent blind rider to continue to develop by encouraging a relationship between the riding environment, the horse and the person. This requires time and can only happen if the rider has access to the equestrian setting before, during and after scheduled lessons.
- An individual’s potential as an independent rider rests heavily on their physical abilities, psychological condition, and orientation and mobility skills. Above all, it depends on their innate interest and passion for riding.

## **Creating a Challenging Equestrian Environment**

### **The Barn:**

Many blind riders at NARHA centers could benefit from the opportunity to participate more in horse care and barn management. This requires the creation of supervised barn lessons. Tools, equipment and the very layout of the barn must be explained and introduced via touch until the rider has comprehended the objects mentally. Tasks such as haltering, grooming and saddling can be mastered by the blind rider as easily as any center volunteer. Only the training process is slightly different and, in some cases, may take a little longer. Always remember that most blind riders are able bodied in every way, except for the ability to see. Therefore, they have the same potential as anyone else to become good “barn hands”. Auditory adaptations such as a buzzer or a radio to designate areas in the barn may be helpful, as well as Braille or raised symbols to designate tack and horse names. All horses should wear small bells attached to

their halters to indicate their location. The blind rider must also be familiar with the location of telephones, fire extinguishers, gates, first aid kits and other amenities. Any drastic alteration to the physical set up of the barn, including the removal or addition of horses, must obviously be transmitted to the blind individual, since they cannot “see” these changes.

### **Use of the round pen:**

Groundwork and riding horses in the round pen can be a wonderful tool for the blind individual. Allow the rider to walk around the enclosure and physically make contact with the surface and feel the structure of the walls. Two sound sources (buzzers or beepers) should be placed on the wall 180 degrees apart. A buzzer on the north wall and a beeper on the south wall will provide two reference points to maintain orientation.

The horse should be equipped with an animal bell placed on the throat latch. This will give the rider a sense of where the animal is located when it is not mounted. In this environment, mounting, dismounting and control of the horse in starting, stopping, walking, trotting, and loping may be mastered. A rider can develop a reasonable amount of confidence and independence with minimal potential for major mishaps. Blind riders should be encouraged to catch and halter their mounts, tack them and then lead them in and around the round pen prior to riding.

### **The Arena:**

The riding arena presents several challenges for the developing rider. With more space, the potential for mishaps goes up and the control of the horse is a must. The arena environment presents orientation and directional issues. The arena should be free of obstacles with nothing hanging or extending from the walls. Normal arena equipment, such as jumps or cones, should be removed unless required for a particular activity. Sound sources should be attached at all four corners of the arena. Alternating placement of beepers and buzzers for orientation purposes would be desirable. The rider can best become familiar with the environment by walking around the enclosure and physically touching its walls. During this process other environmental noises may be noted. These include sounds from street traffic, and heating and cooling units. Sound cues may be placed on cones so that a rider can practice figure eights, which will provide more opportunities to increase skill development in controlling a horse and refining orientation techniques. Bells with different pitches on horses, and perhaps even the instructor and any volunteers, can be beneficial in the arena.

### **Trail riding**

Once a rider has developed excellent riding abilities in safe enclosures, they must learn to handle a horse in a changing environment with minimal cues. It

may be helpful to have a lead rider who will ride in front of a blind individual on the trail. This person must handle their own horse but may have no special skills in working with persons with visual impairments. An animal bell placed on the lead rider's saddle sends auditory cues. The lead rider is followed by the developing rider with no assistants. Announcements of environmental structures may be helpful to some riders, but it is not required. Low hanging branches must be announced or avoided. Insects, changes in terrain, and unexpected visits from animals (such as deer) may call for swift reactions. The trail obstacles, irritated horses and unscheduled dismounts that make trail rides an adventure for sighted riders also will challenge the blind rider. A series of emergency protocols, including how to conduct an emergency dismount must be discussed and perhaps even practiced with the blind rider.

## **Conclusion**

The suggestions mentioned above provide a path for introducing instructors to a number of ways in which blind riders may participate in the various levels of horsemanship. The ultimate tip for working with blind riders is to maximize potentials and minimize the effects of disability, the same for all riders who participate in therapeutic riding.

As an independent horseman with a severe disability, I have gone through three phases. These include the elementary phase: initial contact with equines on the ground and on their back; the intermediate phase: trail riding and formal riding classes. In the advanced phase, I acquired three horses and a mini farm. My days are filled with horse related concerns. All of my prior experiences have provided me with the necessary skills and knowledge to maintain the farm. Now, I ride and train horses by myself. Contact: [wtfen@bellsouth.net](mailto:wtfen@bellsouth.net)