

Can You Spare the Time?

The Importance of Volunteering

By Erika Matulich, Ph.D.

One of the great things about living in America is that anybody is free to enjoy their lives with horses. In other countries, this enjoyment is often reserved for only the very wealthiest people. But what makes our enjoyment of horses possible in this country? Much is due to sponsors and volunteers who help make our world of horses possible. Our generous sponsors contribute money and equipment to allow us to compete in horse events, ride down the trail in a park, or use horses in educational programs. The other half of the equation is a dedicated group of people who contribute their time and labor to help make horsey things happen! Can you be part of that group?

There are many ways to volunteer in our horse community. Think about preparing a trail at a park, working at a competition, being an officer in an organization, or working with horses and people in general. All horse folks are very busy people, so don't feel like you are obligated to be a full-time volunteer. Pick a few hours or a few days out a year, and choose something that you enjoy doing and feel good about.

Places to Enjoy Your Horses

Have you ever taken your horse down the trail and stopped to think how the trail was cleared and built, the trees trimmed, the signage maintained, and the trash picked up? Many of our horse parks have a volunteer core of folks who help out with these efforts. Vicki Lawry is President of the Sunshine State Horse Council, and coordinates the Friends of the Little Manatee State Park. "It's so important to have volunteers to help keep our parks horse friendly. The staff appreciates the assistance, and the volunteers from the equine community help make sure that parks keep trails open for horses."

If we want to continue enjoying equine trails in our local, state, and national parks, it is important that we pitch in and help instead of complaining when trails are shut down. You should also do your part when using the trails by picking up your trash and reporting any safety problems. It helps to bring along a trash bag, and even some marker paint to mark a spot that needs attention.

Photo by John Porter

Chester Weber volunteers as a clinician at event held especially to recognize and reward the volunteers of the Live Oak International CDE.

Photo by John Porter.

Competitions

Have you ever entered a horse show and thought about how the grounds were prepared, how your entry forms were filed, how scores were recorded, or even chairs set up? Most of these activities are done by volunteers. Volunteers for competitions are critical for these events to run smoothly and safely, and in some cases to even run at all! As a show organizer and volunteer coordinator, I have come close to canceling events because there was not enough volunteer staff to safely conduct the event. Luckily at the last minute, neighbors and relatives pitched in to keep the competition going. Volunteers for competitions help keep costs down as well. In an estimate I made for the Live Oak International Combined Driving event, I calculated that entry fees would have to be ten times as much if volunteer man hours were paid at minimum wage.

John Porter of Cypress Keep Farm has competed with horses all his life, including jumping, three-day eventing, cross country, and currently combined driving. John says, "I know that every event I have been to would not have happened without volunteers. Those volunteers made it possible for me to compete and have fun. For that reason, I have a personal philosophy that for every event I compete in, I will also volunteer in one. It's the only way to keep our competitions alive and the costs down." John is the volunteer coordinator for the Sunshine State Combined Driving Event held at the new Florida Horse Park in Ocala April 7-9, 2006. This international-level event will require the assistance of about 100 volunteers.

Equine Organizations

Beth Davidson is an officer of the Lakeland Dressage Association. She points out, "of course, you can't volunteer during a show if you are competing. But you can still volunteer - there is so much to do before and after an event. And there are so many needs all year long for any equine association, group, or club. Volunteers allow our associations to work, and allow everyone to enjoy their breed or their sport."

"Think about what you might be able to offer to your local horse club. The club may be breed specific (such as Arabian, Thoroughbred, Welsh, etc.), or sport specific (such as trail, saddleseat, hunter, dressage, or driving). Can you help set up a clinic? Help at a competition? Assist at a meeting? Even if you don't have time to be an officer of an organization, think about what you can do, even if it is simple phone calls, envelope stuffing, or

bringing coffee to a meeting.

Photo by BB Blackwelder

Susan Diemer, David Blackwelder, and Earl Diemer assist a driver with a safety check of harness and cart.

Photo by Mitch Blackwelder.

Many organizations not only work with equines, but also hold events to help out charities. For example, the Tampa Horse Show Association exists to run horse shows that benefit charities - proceeds from their shows have resulted in over \$150,000 in donations over the years. There are many benefit trail rides, events, and shows that involve the combined volunteer efforts of both horsey and non-horsey people and benefit the needy.

In addition to breed or sport organizations, there are a number of other organizations, such as equine rescue, therapeutic work, youth groups, and educational associations. All are in need of volunteers to help with their missions. Nonprofit associations especially are dependent on the helping hands of volunteers, either on a regular basis, or at special events.

Benefits of Volunteering

So what's in it for you if you volunteer? There are many benefits of volunteering, but you need to volunteer only because you feel it is worthwhile and you sincerely want to help out. If you start worrying about your "payback," you might get some unrealistic expectations about what volunteer work is all about.

All the same, volunteering can be a fun and rewarding experience. You can meet new people and form new friendships. You can learn more about a particular breed, a certain sport, or a charitable organization. You can figure out how to make things tick when organizing an event. Some people's volunteer experiences have even helped them find a new job!

Photo by BB Blackwelder

David Blackwelder, a long time volunteer at the annual Live Oak Combined Driving Event, pressure washes the dressage judge booths in preparation for a competition. Photo by BB Blackwelder.

Volunteering is also a good way to help your non-horsey friends or relatives get involved in your sport while you compete. Instead of dragging them along to watch you (which they think is boring), get them involved in doing something important. Even your children can help out by picking up trash, delivering water, running scores, opening/closing gates, or other tasks. Involving a spouse can also make them feel important and supportive, and many a non-horsey spouse has been converted to more

involvement in the sport after volunteering!

Volunteering will cost you money. You will need to buy gas and possibly lodging for traveling. You often need to provide your own food, water, chairs, or equipment. You may be able to deduct some of these expenses on your tax return - check to see if your volunteer organization is nonprofit, and check with your tax advisor.

Most organizations try to take care of their volunteers, with food, free parking, or free event admission. You may also be able to get a closeup view of a top equestrian, learn from a famous clinician, or get a rewarding hug from a child whose world has changed because of horses. Regardless of the many benefits of volunteering, volunteer because you want to help out, with no strings attached.

How Do I Volunteer?

Before volunteering, you need to take inventory and assess what you are realistically able to do. How much time do you have? How long do you want to be involved - short term for one event or long term over the course of the year(s)? Is your schedule flexible or fixed? You need to decide how much time you have to offer and whether you can commit to those times. Remember that horse organizations and events are dependent on volunteers, and if you can't show up, you need to provide a substitute, or plenty of notice so a substitute can be found.

What skills do you have to offer? You may have some unique skills, such as veterinary training, announcing, website administration, or advertising design that you can offer. But you can also do many other important jobs that don't take special skills, such as timing with a stopwatch, helping people park, or even taking out the trash. Be honest about your level of expertise and your ability to handle a particular duty. If you don't feel comfortable, say so. It is better to find the right person for the job than to do the job badly.

Photo by Summer Best

If you are interested in a certain equestrian discipline, volunteering at an event is a great way to learn more about it. Photo by Summer Best.

Think about what you enjoy doing, but also realize that not all volunteer tasks are enjoyable. Enjoyable or not, every volunteer task is needed. During one weekend horse show, my only job was to run to dozens of port-a-potties scattered over one hundred acres and make sure they still had toilet paper! While not an exciting job, it was quite necessary. In any case, think about how you fit in to particular volunteer duties. Do you like to work alone, or with another group of volunteers? Would you rather be

out in the thick of activity, or behind the scenes? Do you mind physical labor, dirt, or discomfort, or would you rather have an office-type job? Can you handle the emotional risks associated with rescuing animals or dealing with critically ill children in a riding program? Knowing how you fit in best and what your comfort zone is will help you identify volunteer positions where you will be most happy.

Once you have assessed your time, skills, and interests, it's time to find the right organization. Try to volunteer in an area most closely associated with what you do. If you are a trail rider, contact your local park and see what might need to be done with their trails or facilities. If you adore quarter horses, see what you can do for the breed organization. If you are an animal activist, look up rescue organizations and see how you can help. If you love eventing, contact the competition organizer and volunteer your time. If you want to be a judge one day, volunteer to assist one and learn more about it.

To volunteer in many organizations, you may need to do some training or certification, especially in therapeutic riding programs. For particular events, you may need to learn how to use equipment, or understand the rules of the competition. And for others, you simply may need to offer your time, your effort, and your smile!

Photo by Summer Best

Volunteering at a Therapeutic Riding Organization is a rewarding experience. Photo by Summer Best.

There are many websites and publications that list equine organizations, clubs, rescues, charities, associations, parks, shows, and trails. Don't wait for them to contact you - they don't know you want to volunteer! Actively seek out an opportunity to volunteer, and help keep our world of horses accessible and enjoyable to all.

Interested in Volunteering?

Live Oak Combined Driving Event

www.cailiveoak.com or email ematulich@ut.edu.

Florida Horse Park Horse Trials

www.flhorsepark.com or email ABryant@seminolefeed.com

Sunshine State Driving Events & Cypress Keep Events

Email John Porter at cypresskeep@starband.net

Marion Therapeutic Riding Association, Inc.

www.mtraocala.org or email agossett1@mindspring.com

Sunshine State Horse Council
www.sshc.org or email VicshadyL@aol.com

Contact editor@ecmagazine for additional volunteer opportunities.