

There's a huge breadth of volunteering options available in equestrian sport depending on individual skills, experience, interests and time available, discovers *Hilary Manners*



 **VOLUNTEER:** 
to freely offer to do something

Volunteers are the life-blood of equestrianism, whether it be manning crossing points on a cross-country course, pole picking in a showjump arena or even standing as a non-Executive Director of a British Equestrian member body. They bring huge benefits to events up and down the country, and are invariably a diverse bunch. Looking after them is key to retaining them – and events would not run successfully without this dedicated army of enthusiasts.

At Blair Castle International, Scotland's biggest equestrian event, they welcome around 450 volunteers over the four days of the show, which hosts eventing, showing and showjumping classes. Assistant Event Director, Nicky Townshend, acknowledges their contribution: "Volunteers are crucial to the success of any event, especially one as large as Blair. They really are the behind-the-scenes heroes who ensure that so many aspects of the event run smoothly. They are so generous with their time, which we deeply appreciate."

TURNING THEIR HANDS TO ANYTHING AND EVERYTHING

Two of the most experienced volunteers in the country must be Nigel and Jane Clark. Jane started when she worked for the Midland Bank, then a big sponsor of eventing. Nigel was enticed into it when the couple met in 1991 and Jane was organiser of Buckminster Horse Trials. As Nigel says, "It seemed like a good idea to get involved!"

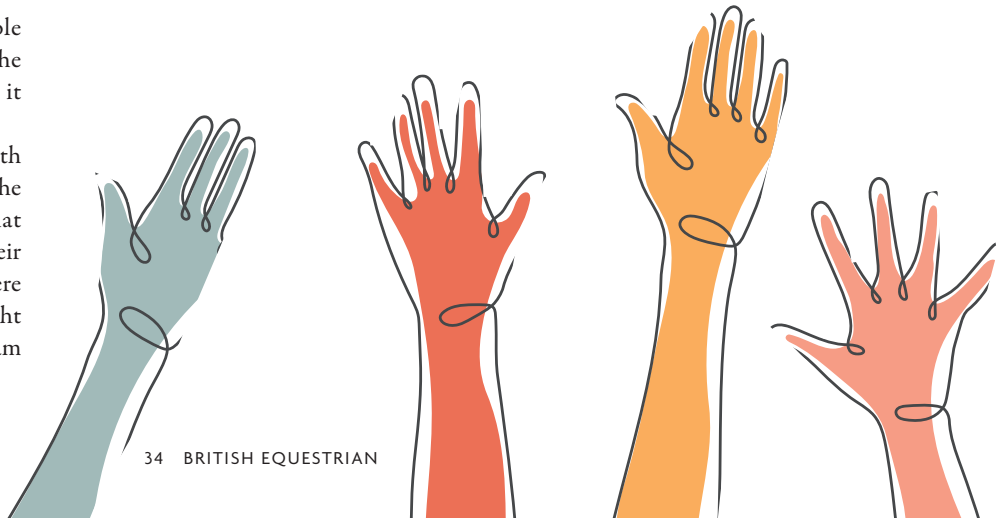
Over the years they have taken on most roles, from cross-country start/finish, fence judging and scoring to building dressage arenas and showjump courses, organising prize presentations and even manning the BBQ so that officials get well fed.

The pair agrees that it is "the people you meet, the friends you make and the opportunities which arise," that make it so worthwhile.

"It was an honour to be involved with London 2012, particularly helping at the Paralympics. To be in and around that arena, watching the competitors and their achievements was really moving. We were brought to tears when, leaving one night and passing a local pub, the French team



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came over and applauded us,” says Nigel.

Nigel and Jane also worked at Rio 2016, the World Championships in Tryon 2018, Tokyo 2020 and, most recently, the Pan American Games in Santiago last year. “Being able to help events overcome sometimes major challenges and be part of delivering a successful competition is very satisfying.”

They also love helping at small, unaffiliated events where riders are often inexperienced and nervous. “Seeing them conquer their fears and the buzz they get is probably more rewarding than seeing a mega star ‘do it again’ on their fourth ride of the day,” says Jane.

AGE IS NO BARRIER

Eighty-year-old Liz Marshall might not be quite as active as in the past, but she has been working with Lincolnshire Wolds Riding for the Disabled, incorporating carriage driving, for almost 40 years.

“I’ve done most jobs in that time, both hands-on and admin-based – I was the treasurer for over a decade. These days I tend to man the bookings, wash the numnahs, run tack sales and pop-up kitchens and, obviously key, help make tea while chatting to parents and carers!”

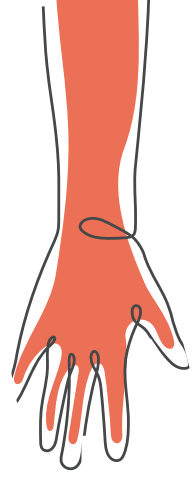
“It’s particularly satisfying for all of us volunteers when we see some of our group riding independently and achieving their goals.”

One of the Pony Club’s eldest volunteers is in her 90s. Angela Ellis took on the role of Secretary for the Crawley and Horsham Branch as a teenager, and still attends every committee meeting, taking the minutes to this day, showing true Pony Club dedication.

YOUNG BLOOD

For younger equine enthusiasts, the Young Equestrian Leaders Award, run by The Pony Club, is a good starting point. The three-phase scheme recognises the time and effort involved in volunteering while also enabling those between 13 and 25 to gain a range of skills and experiences as they help out at a BEF member body centre, event or group. There are currently more than 700 people registered for this programme.

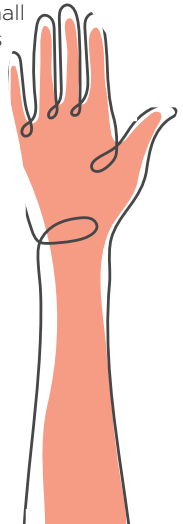
British Eventing, which has over 9,000 volunteers registered on its database, also presents a Young Volunteer of the Year award. A recent winner of this was Isla Gaskin from Surrey. Isla, now 18, has been helping at events since she was 12 years old. Nominated by Rebecca Harvie, organiser of Munstead Horse Trials, she was a regular pole picker and dressage sheet collector for the event, now having moved on to jump judging, helping with packed lunches and lending a hand in the secretary’s tent if needed. She has been described by Rebecca as “always having a smile on her face, and a real worker – she just keeps going.”



Previous page:
Nigel and Jane
Clark at the Rio
Olympic Games

Left: Organisations
such as the Riding
for the Disabled
Association (RDA)
offer rewarding
opportunities

Top: Liz Marshall
still volunteers
aged 80



VOLUNTEERING



Isla explains why she does it: “I began volunteering because I wanted to contribute to the event. The idea of being around the horses, feeling the excitement but skipping the nerve-racking part – actually riding – drew me in. I love any job where I can talk to people, especially the tea run; the cross-country fence judges are always happy to see you! There is a strong sense of teamwork, and the gratitude from competitors makes it very rewarding.”

A GOOD STARTING POINT

The Pony Club is where many youngsters start their love affair with horses. Beverley Laurie, Volunteering Development Officer, explains: “Many of our volunteers were Pony Club members as children and have gone on to volunteer themselves, often in the same Branch, giving back the enjoyment

and opportunities to the next generation.

“Currently, The Pony Club has over 10,000 volunteers who are the backbone of the organisation. Roles are varied with something to suit everyone, and The Pony Club also offers a range of training courses to assist volunteers in the roles they hold. The skills and knowledge they gain are often transferable to roles in the world of work and these achievements are a great addition to the volunteer’s CV, personal statements for college or university, or application forms for employment.”

British Equestrian is made up of 19 independent member bodies which between them represent more than 280,000 people with a wide range of equestrian interests, from elite sport to leisure activities. There really is something for everyone – so join the fun!

FIND OUT MORE

Interested in taking part? Check out the below useful links for more information.

- The **British Equestrian website** has guidance for employers about volunteers, as well as sites to find volunteers where would-be volunteers can sign up.
- **Volunteer’s Week** is recognised nationally 3-9 June and their **website** has lots of information on volunteering.
- **The Pony Club website** also has more information about opportunities with them and their awards.
- If you’d like further details on volunteering with **Riding for the Disabled**, visit the dedicated section on their **website**.

Top: An RDA group riding session