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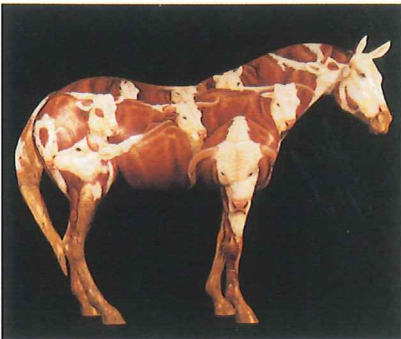
- FIRST-TIME FOALING
- BREEDING CONTRACTS
- NEW MEXICO'S PAINTED PONIES
- SELLING YOUR HORSE



16



24



34



44

FEATURES

16 Common-sense foaling

Breeders share strategies for prenatal mare care, safe delivery and your foal's first successful steps into life.

By Kellie Tormey

24 Breeding contracts

A well-written and well-read contract will save Appaloosa owners time and trouble.

By Stacy Pigott

34 The Trail of Painted Ponies

New Mexico's premier public art project brings the mythology and dignity of the horse to the Land of Enchantment.

By Robin Hendrickson

44 For sale

Selling a horse sometimes is as complicated as buying one. These tips can help you pave the way to a smooth sales experience with a happy ending for you, your horse and the buyer.

By Sushil Dilai Wenholtz

ARTICLES &
DEPARTMENTS

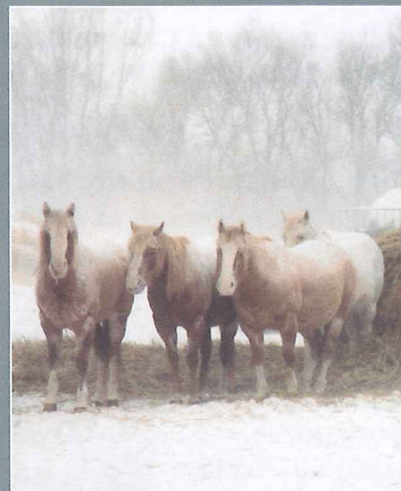
- 6** **Inside the Lines**
- 8** **Letters from Readers**
- 54** **Field Notes**
- 62** **Appaloosa Journal Interview**
Frozen semen
By Diane Rice
- 68** **Off the Track**
Strike it Rich Stallion Futurity
By Stacy Pigott
- 74** **Horse Health**
Preparing for cooled transported semen
By Michelle Berg Anderson
- 78** **On the Trail**
The Sheltowee Trail Ride
By Roland Haun, ApHC Director
- 200** **Appaloosa Bloodlines**
Prince Shannon
By Michelle Berg Anderson

APHC
SERVICES

- 40** **CPO Clinics**
- 84** **Leading the Nation**
- 120** **Show Calendar**
- 134** **Breeders' Trust**
- 141** **Stakes Winners**
- 142** **Race Leaders**
- 160** **Regional Clubs List**
- 162** **ACAAP Top 10**
- 165** **Leading Sires**
- 193** **ApHC Directors and Staff**

ADVERTISING
SECTIONS

- 145** **Stallion Avenue**
- 154** **Sale Ring**
- 166** **Classifieds**
- 175** **Horseman's Directory**
- 197** **Advertising Index**
- 198** **Stallion Index**



On the cover: Sheldak mares in sub-zero weather. Photo by Kim Utke.



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PHOTO BY KIM UTKE

Healthy foals result from careful planning during the gestational period.

Common-sense Foaling

Breeders share strategies for prenatal mare care, safe delivery
and your foal's first successful steps into life.

BY KELLIE TORMEY

Foaling out your mare may become one of the most rewarding yet stressful chapters you'll share as her owner. From sweaty palms to sleepless nights, many owners cite an array of symptoms that rival their mares' condition during those last few days of gestation.

Appaloosa breeders Wayne Beck and Kim and Dave Utke share their foaling experience and knowledge so you can prepare for a safe delivery and give your foal a healthy and happy beginning.

GOOD CARE FROM THE START

Wayne, owner of Beck Farms in Lodi, California, has bred champion Appaloosas and Quarter Horses for 25

years. The farm currently stands eight stallions, maintains 40 broodmares and also breeds to outside mares.

Wayne says one of the keys to a successful delivery is to provide excellent care from the start. At Beck Farms, a mare has three ultrasound examinations with a veterinarian during her pregnancy. The first exam, at about 14 to 16 days, confirms the mare is pregnant and may detect if she's carrying twins.

A second exam takes place at about 21 to 30 days. If the mare is pregnant, the veterinarian will again check for twins. If she's not pregnant, it's safe to assume the owner will need to make arrangements for a repeat breeding. A final ultrasound at 45 to 50 days is optional and can confirm the pregnancy is progressing well.

Kim and Dave own Sheldak Ranch, a large breeding farm in Sheldon, North Dakota. Sheldak Ranch is legendary for its approach to raising horses. Kim and Dave rely on the instincts of their mares and stallions to breed, carry and foal what they call “the natural way.”

Kim agrees that a good beginning is essential. However, since Sheldak stallions are bred strictly to their own mares, they rarely use ultrasound. Instead, stallions are turned out on pasture with bands of mares during the breeding season, allowing Mother Nature to take her course. Eventually, Kim says, the Utkes will look for physical cues to determine if mares are pregnant.

FEED AND EXERCISE

Once bred, both farms keep their mares out on pasture. Wayne says the mix of the group is important. “We like to make sure the mares are compatible,” he explains, “and if we can, to keep them from hurting each other.”

This is especially important at feeding time, when herd hierarchy may result in some mares getting too much feed and others not enough. Wayne solves this problem by providing individual feeders for each mare. Their diet consists of good-quality oat, grass or alfalfa hay with a daily grain or pellet supplement. Ample fresh water and an iodized salt block complete the menu.

Sheldak broodmares live in large open fields, some separated by a distance of several miles. This separation can make monitoring more difficult, but Dave and Kim believe the benefits of the open environment far outweigh the risks.

“We feel that breeding and foaling the natural way helps develop the best attitude and disposition in a foal, which carries on to the adult horse,” Kim says.

During the winter, Sheldak provides wagons full of alfalfa hay for its mares. Each week the wagons are refilled and moved to a new location. This method, says Kim, ensures the horses have ample feed at all times to help them combat temperatures that can drop below a bone-chilling -40 degrees Fahrenheit. Heated water tanks, minerals and molasses are kept near buildings, so mares get plenty of exercise trekking back and forth.

As foaling season approaches, corn or pellet grain cubes supplement their diet. Feeding at the same time each day has another benefit. “This way they come to us and we don’t have to drive across the pastures checking for them,” Kim explains.

Wayne suggests taking a common-sense approach to nutrition. “It’s really important not to let the mare get too fat,” he warns.



PHOTO BY KIM UTKE

Bright Eyes Brother daughter and World champion producer Ms Bright Tribute just days before foaling at Sheldak Ranch.

Weight should be gained gradually during the mare’s pregnancy, and dramatic changes, up or down, may warrant a call to the veterinarian.

Exercise is another important component of your mare’s health. “In large pastures, broodmares can move freely, and in a sense, exercise themselves,” Kim says.

If you own a riding mare or keep your mare in a smaller enclosure, experts agree she should exercise regularly throughout the pregnancy, as long as the work isn’t new or overly strenuous.

MAINTAIN ROUTINE CARE

Pregnancy is no time to neglect other basics. It’s important to keep up on your mare’s regular immunization and farrier schedule, and her teeth should be checked annually. Deworming is especially important. Both Sheldak Ranch and Beck Farms use a rotational worming program, alternating products depending on the time of year.

In addition, both farms deworm their mares about 30 days before their delivery date, and then again either just prior to delivery or immediately after. Wayne explains that if the mare is infested with parasites, she can pass on at least one type to the foal through her milk. Once the foal is about a month old, it should begin a regular deworming program.



Sheldak Ranch mares foal in pasture without the help of humans.

DOWN TO THE WIRE

In the final weeks before delivery, owners should begin to observe their mares more closely. At Sheldak, Kim and Dave conduct their daily feeding rounds and keep an eye out for anything out of the ordinary. However, their goal is to not interfere.

“The best environment for mares to foal in is a large, clean pasture,” Kim says. “In our program the mares do it on their own.”

Wayne echoes this philosophy, stating that the “natural way for the mare is always the best.” However, several weeks before their due date, his mares are brought in from pasture to stay in large grassy paddocks or 16-by-20-foot foaling stalls, depending on the weather.

“If the weather is good,” Wayne explains, “it’s better for the mare to foal outside where there are fewer obstacles to get in her way during delivery.”

If the weather is bad, she’ll foal in stalls stripped of any old bedding, hosed down with disinfectant and lined with fresh new bedding.

Kim and Wayne both cite some of the typical signs your mare may show in the weeks or days preceding delivery. Symptoms may include filling or swelling of the mare’s udder as she begins to “milk up”; small droplets of dried colostrum or “waxing up” visible on her teats; a visible loosening or relaxation of the muscles surrounding the dock of her tail; and looking or scratching at her barrel. Some mares may also roll from side to side in an effort to reposition the growing foal. Kim cautions it’s important not to misread this behavior as colic, but if you’re in doubt, always consult your veterinarian.

THE DAY ARRIVES

When it’s time for the mare to foal, Dave and Kim respect her instincts.

“Nearly all of our mares foal out on pasture, during the night,” Kim says. “So if there’s a rare problem, it’s unknown until morning check. If there’s any serious problem we can’t handle, of course, we call a veterinarian. But our horses are bred to foal as nature intended, alone and unassisted.”

At Beck Farms, full-time manager Dave Beatty is on hand to assist with any difficult deliveries.

“By the time the mare is ready to foal, the owner has a tremendous investment in the foal,” Wayne says. “We try to make the setting as safe as possible.”

Having a vet present at delivery is up to the owner, but for those less experienced, it can be reassuring to know that an expert is just a phone call away. Either way, both breeders suggest owners become familiar with the basics of delivery. You should also meet or speak with your veterinarian in advance and have a game plan should something go wrong. They can give you advice on preparing a foaling kit of supplies, and also phone numbers you can use in an emergency.

Once the foal is expelled from the womb, Kim advises watching the newborn for any signs of stress. The umbilical cord generally breaks free on its own. At Sheldak Ranch, Kim and Dave leave the umbilical site alone because contamination is unlikely in the large, grassy fields. At Beck Farms, Wayne says they always clean the umbilicus and navel site by dipping it in a prepared Nolvasan solution just as a precaution.

Nolvasan, with the active ingredient chlorhexidine, is widely accepted as the best treatment for cleansing the area. Recent medical evidence and breeder experience strongly warn against using tincture of iodine to clean or dip the umbilicus or navel site because its use can lead to serious complications later.

Once the foal arrives, Wayne says it’s important to determine whether the mare has expelled the entire placenta. Sometimes the placenta may cover the foal’s head when it emerges, but it’ll usually come off when the foal stands up for the first time. If you suspect the placenta hasn’t been fully expelled within three hours after the birth, it may be wise to call your vet. Complications or infection may result from a partially retained placenta. When the placenta is expelled, it’s recommended you save it for your veterinarian’s inspection.

ON FOUR LEGS

It’s critical for your new foal to begin nursing shortly after birth. Colostrum, the first milk the dam produces,

contains antibodies to help boost the foal's immune system. If your mare's colostrum production is impaired for any reason, Wayne and Kim advise, it's best to find another available source. Some breeding farms or veterinarians will keep a frozen supply on hand for emergencies.

If your foal is having difficulty nursing, Kim recommends examining the mare's udder for soreness or injury. She recalls one particular foal whose dam wouldn't let it nurse. When she and Dave caught the mare and examined her, they found she had a tiny puncture wound in her udder.

Many times a newborn foal will have trouble with its first bowel movement. The first manure, or meconium as it's called, can be dry and difficult to pass. If after several hours the foal appears uncomfortable or straining, both farms recommend administering an enema.

"One of the greatest concerns to watch for in the newborn is scours, or foal diarrhea," Kim says. If caught early, scours can generally clear up within a few days. However, if left untreated, foals can quickly become dehydrated and may require electrolytes and medication prescribed by a veterinarian.

In fact during your foal's first week, it's always best to err on the side of caution if you suspect there may be something wrong. Newborn foals can be very fragile. They aren't old enough yet to have a supply of body fat or energy reserves, so if they're stressed, their condition can deteriorate quickly. If you have any questions or concerns about your baby's condition, it's best to call your veterinarian as soon as you suspect a problem.

BRINGING UP BABY

Since the foals at Sheldak Ranch are born in the fields, Kim says they learn to stay close to their dams

and quickly develop social skills.

"It isn't long before they're surrounding us for attention at pasture checks," Kim says. "Our foaling begins in mid-April, and by June or July we'll administer the foal's first round of vaccinations and deworming."

Which vaccinations you choose to administer depend on the time of year and your location. Again, it's best to discuss the options with your veterinarian.

Both Sheldak Ranch and Beck Farms introduce foals to solid food through the use of creep feeders. These feeders have vertical panels wide enough for only the foals to pass through. Though the foal may experiment with its dam's feed even earlier, feeding of solid feed or supplements begins at about 1 to 2 months of age. Eating solid feed leads the foal into maturity, and owners reap the benefits of months of planning and care.

Despite the preparation, Kim warns, owners may still encounter problems. "We get our share of crises," she says. "But when people observe the attitudes, dispositions and behavior of our horses, we feel our success starts from conception." 🐾



PHOTO BY KIM UTKE

Stallions used in pasture breeding and foaling share parenting responsibilities.



PHOTO BY KIM UTKE

Socialization helps foals develop mentally and physically.