

And Baby Makes Two

By Kim Houlding, DVM

Now is the time of year when plans are made for the next breeding season. New stallions are available, and fees and contracts are out. Stallion service auctions will be coming up. What are the considerations you have to make before you engage in a breeding program?

First and foremost-do you have the time and facility to maintain a mare and her foal? New foals take a lot of time-they must be handled, led, groomed, wormed and vaccinated. Young horses are phenomenally dumb, and prone to injuries. Having proper facilities - fencing and stalls - helps prevent injuries, but anyone who has had a foal will tell you that they can find the darndest places to get hurt. To add to the problem, if they have not been handled, they will be difficult to treat and can injure you or cause further damage to themselves.

It takes a lot of money to pay breeding fees, mare care, and veterinary bills. Many of these are due at the time of service. If your mare fails to deliver a live foal, you may be entitled to a return service, but not always. You will have to meet certain conditions as far as your mare-she must have current vaccinations, worming and coggins test, maybe other tests, to protect the stallion, the stallion owner and other horses at the farm at which she will be bred. You will need a way to know if she is in heat - that is, receptive, to the stallion and ready to breed. A first time mare may be difficult to breed-it is scary to have a big stallion approach-it may take time, hobbles, blinders or tranquilizers to keep the mare and stallion from getting hurt while getting the job done.

What is your plan for the foal? Will you keep it and raise and train it? Do you know how to train a young horse? If you are planning on a sale baby, where will you sell? Purebred sales have fees to consign-this may be hundreds of dollars. If you think you may take the colt to the local sale barn, be aware that many horses do not even get a bid at local auctions if there is no one who wants such a horse. Will you take the horse home or return to get it if there is no sale? There will be fees even for a no sale. With the cost of fuel, you have to think carefully about hauling any distance. If your horse is bought by a

slaughter buyer, will that be ok? If you have feelings about your foal going to slaughter, you want to keep it or plan to sell privately, assuming someone may want your horse. Preparing for a sale takes time and money. The colt must be fed, handled, trimmed, tested and ready for a new buyer. Failure to prepare for the sale will lead to lower prices. Should your mare be bred? We all think we have the best and most beautiful, but be honest with yourself. Does your mare justify breeding? Is she broke to ride? Has she been successful as a show or performance horse? Is her pedigree of any value? Does she have proper conformation? Are there problems that should not be reproduced? Does she have temperament issues? Does she have conformation defects? Short neck, crooked legs, bad disposition-these will likely show in her foal as well. Don't expect to get a 16 h or taller colt from a small mare. Is she registered? Unregistered horses are the hardest to sell, as there is no place to show them. If a mustang, there are already too many mustangs - these should not be reproduced, as there is a great excess out West already. Is she in foal now? When is her due date? Do you have the facilities to foal her or a place to send her to board when she foals? Iowa's extreme winters are lethal to newborn animals until late in the spring. Even then, a cold rain could cause a new foal to die of exposure. Will you be around to watch the mare, in case there is trouble with the delivery or the foal? If someone else is caring for her delivery, do they have closed-circuit cameras? Will someone be around at night when most deliveries occur? She will need

a large area in which to foal safely. If the area is too small, she may step on the foal, injuring it or even killing it. If there are horses close by, she needs an area where she is secluded. Horses nearby will upset her, and cause problems with delivering or caring for the foal. Her instinct will be to protect the foal; she may injure the foal in her attempts to protect it. If she is open, why? Is she a first time mare? Is she at least 3 or 4 years old? Has she proven her worth as a riding or show horse? Is she in good health? Are her vaccinations up to date? She should have boosters well ahead of breeding, including respiratory diseases-rhino, flu and strangles. Mixing with new horses is a potential hotbed of disease spread!!! Has she been on a good rotational worming program? Was she bred last year and did not have a foal? Did she conceive, but reabsorb or abort foals? Is her cycle regular? Did she produce active follicles last year? Has she been biopsied, cultured and scoped? Do you have a way to check for twins? Or will you leave her at the farm until she is safe in foal-about 30 days pregnant? Will your regular veterinarian be available to deliver the foal? Do you have a regular veterinarian?

The next step is selecting a stallion. Is he of exceptional quality? Has he performed or produced? "Breeding stock paint" means the horse is solid colored, not that it is of a quality that should be bred. As a matter of fact, a breeding stock paint **lacks the principal trait** that paint horses have - the paint color pattern. What breeds are allowed to cross breed with your mare and chosen stallion if you are not trying for a pure bred? What is the stallion's size? Color? Pedigree? Are there undesirable genetic conditions you need to be aware of, such as SCID in Arabians and HYPP in quarter horses? How many mares did he cover last year? How many delivered live foals? How many were registered? These may be indicators of fertility issues or poor farm management issues. Is anyone actively promoting the stallion or his offspring? You are making a sizeable investment financially, and committing a good deal of time to this effort. Your mare may only have a few foals-do you want to risk 25 or 30% of



"Shadow" (colt) and "Watson" play during a light rain shower.

Owner: Paula Griffin of West Branch, Iowa.

Photo by friend Megan Grant

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her offspring on this stallion?

Next, look at the facility where your mare will be bred, if you are not breeding at home. What facilities do they have to heat detect and breed your mare safely for them and her? Will you have any liability if your mare hurts someone or the stallion? What is the farm record for FIRST service conception? Most mares will eventually get in foal in spite of efforts; a good farm will get them in foal promptly. Most mares should conceive on the first service – about 90%. Most of the remainder should be in foal by the second cycle.

Is there adequate and safe space for your mare? A stall, day after day, will be stressful for her, and possibly inhumane, as horses need social contact and exercise. It is also beneficial for the mare to be exposed to sunlight, as that helps her system decide it is spring. Early breeding is most successful if the mare is exposed to lights at night, so she thinks it is spring and time to be cycling.

Can the farm give you references from other customers? Who will be doing their veterinary work? Will their veterinarian give them a good reference? A farm that does not have a veterinarian that they use regularly, may not pay their bills, or not provide good care. If your mare is injured or sick who will come?

Who is the farm manager? What experience does the manager or staff have? Will heat detection be done properly, so that your mare can be exposed to the stallion properly?

This author sent a mare to be bred at an outside farm. The manager called his veterinarian when he thought the foal wasn't gaining weight. After expensive blood tests and medicine, it was determined that the mare was simply not getting enough to eat.

The mares were getting fed in buckets hung 4 feet apart on a fence. This mare – a young first-time mother, would not come up to eat. An unnecessary expense because of an inexperienced manager.

If you are doing AI, how will semen be handled and evaluated? The process of collecting and extending semen usually lessens fertility. What quality control is there for the semen to be free of contamination (manure, bacteria etc)? Will motility be checked at insemination time? Prior to shipment?

Breeding is a great experience, but it is expensive. The current market conditions make it much less expensive to buy than raise a horse. It takes years for a foal to be ready to ride. If you have young children, they will be grown or may lose interest before the foal is of riding age. Injury or attitude may make this foal unacceptable for riding, so all your efforts will be for nothing. Or someone may be injured in the process of raising and training the new foal. Give serious thought to your endeavor, and you may be rewarded with a nice foal and a happy family.

Kim Houlding, DVM, graduated from ISU DVM in 1976. She has been an official show veterinarian, drug testing veterinarian and licensed steward as well as exhibitor with the organization since that time. Houlding is currently working on her judge's cards in Hunter, Jumper, Hunter Equitation and Hunter Breeding with USEF and USHJA.

“We have always shown homebreds, and they have been successful as hunters, jumpers and equitation horses, as well as numerous hunter breeding winners and Champions. We were to receive an award at the USHJA convention for being the leading breeder in Zone 6 this year. We have had Several Zone Champions in our zone and horses we sold that competed in other zones. We also raised and sold two fillies that started at Prairie Meadows this year. They placed with a 2nd and 4th in seven starts between them. One went on to Woodlands in Kansas City and won there. Our breeding philosophy was to key on a broodmare sire of exceptional soundness-177 starts in 10 yrs, who earned well and had iron legs. More about him later.”