

## **Breeding Your Mare**

By Sarah Gately-Wilson

As you stand at the fence watching your beloved mare you may think about breeding her this year, producing a foal to carry on her legacy! As you contemplate the perfect stallion to breed your mare to, the resulting foal is there in your mind's eye; its temperament, conformation, personality, and a long future of being the horse of your dreams.

### **Where do you start?**

To create your ideal horse you must first define what that is. What kind of horse do you want? Do you want a dressage horse? An eventer? Perhaps a reining horse or a barrel racer? Whatever your end goal, you need to think about what kind of stallion will compliment your mare to produce your ideal horse.

### **The Stallion**

Once you have an idea of what you are looking for, you need to further refine your search to find the right stallion for your mare. By choosing a stallion with conformation that will compliment your mare, you will help ensure a healthy, sound foal. If your mare is long-backed, seek a stallion with a short back and strong coupling. If your mare has a delicate frame, find a stallion with substance. Some additional points to consider in your selection process should include the stallion's past performance. Is he a proven producer of quality foals? How is his disposition? Does he catch your eye?



*A young stallion with one of his mares.*

### **The Mare**

Once you have chosen your ideal stallion it is time to prepare for conception. It is very important to have open lines of communication with the stallion owner and stud farm. Whether you are sending your mare to the stud farm or having semen shipped to your mare, it is important to have a good vet, someone who will be able to help you care for your mare and help you ensure that she has a safe and healthy pregnancy. The first step

is to have your mare checked out by a veterinarian to make sure she is “breeding sound.” Your vet will palpate your mare’s uterus, cervix, and ovaries to check for abnormalities and assess where she is in her cycle, as well as take a culture to rule out any possibilities of infection. Once your mare has been determined to be cycling she is ready to go to the stud farm. Or, if you will be breeding by transported semen, the stallion will come to her.

### **When To Breed**

In the northern hemisphere, most mares are only fertile during the spring and summer months. This limits your time frame to breed your mare and creates a very busy time of the year for stud farms. In order to ensure your mare becomes impregnated it is important to follow her estrous cycle carefully and be able to pinpoint ovulation. The typical mare cycles every 21 days. When she begins to show signs of being “in heat”, you can expect she will ovulate before the week is out. In order to know when your mare is in heat the use of a teaser stallion, rectal palpation, or ultrasound will eliminate any doubts. In the case of the latter two, your vet will measure the follicle and estimates the timing of ovulation. The typical follicle grows 3 to 5mm per day and rarely ovulates prior to reaching 35mm in diameter.



*Mares give their new foals an encouraging nudge to nurse.*

### **She’s Ready Now**

Once your vet has determined that your mare is in estrous you should call the stud farm and advise them that you will need a shipment. Make sure of any limitations on collection before your mare is ready to be bred. Make sure that semen is always available; some farms do not collect on weekends or if the stallion is at a show. Also, make sure you contact the farm at least 24 hours in advance of when you need the semen shipped. Most farms ship semen via Fed-ex, UPS, or counter-to-counter through airlines. Likewise, make sure the veterinarian who will be doing the palpation and insemination is available at all times. It is no use having a mare ready to be bred and no one available to inseminate her.

Once the semen is shipped and in your possession, notify your veterinarian immediately. Do not open the package. It is essential that the semen remain at a cooled temperature until insemination. The shipment should contain two doses as well as information on when the semen was collected, its volume and motility, and of course, what stallion it

was collected from. Your vet may inseminate your mare with both doses if she will likely ovulate within the next 24 hours, or more often, save one dose to be inseminated the following day. A small sample of the semen should be set aside to be evaluated under a microscope for progressive motility. In some instances, if the package was tampered with, or if the stud farm was negligent, the semen may not be of acceptable quality. Make sure the sample was properly mixed and warmed prior to evaluation. In the cooled state progressive motility can be alarmingly low.

### **In Foal or Not?**

Once your mare has been inseminated, the next step is to determine whether or not she is in foal. This can be done several ways. If a teaser stallion is available, the mare should be teased starting two weeks after the last insemination. If by day 20, the mare shows no signs of heat there is a 90 percent chance she is bred. Pregnancy can be confirmed by rectal palpation starting at 21 days post-breeding, or even earlier by ultrasound. If your mare is not in foal and comes back into heat, you need to contact the stud farm immediately and start the process over again. Breeding is a very delicate procedure and can be frustrating. It requires a great deal of patience and care.



*It is good to raise foals together so they learn their manners and social skills.*

### **Counting The Days**

If you are lucky enough to get your mare bred on the first try, you can then start counting down the days until the new arrival. Many breeders strive to provide a calm and stress-free environment for their bred mares. However, if your mare is accustomed to being ridden there is no reason to stop now. A little bit of exercise will benefit both mare and foal. It is important not to overdue it though. Now is not the time to start a new career of cross-country jumping! Considering your mare's diet, maintain a balanced ration with the necessary trace minerals and vitamins. Do not give her rich feeds and supplements unless your vet recommends them to compensate for a deficiency. Ideally, pregnant mares are pastured with other broodmares or their usual herd. Mares should be kept away from horses traveling to and from shows or racetracks, where infectious diseases can be contracted. If all goes well, you can expect your new addition in approximately 340 days (give or take 20 days).