

Working Moms

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Back in the days when horses pulled the plows and harvesting machines across agricultural America, it was not uncommon to see a team of horses trudging over a field with a young foal trailing behind one of the mares. Many farmers could not afford the luxury of allowing a broodmare to take a four- or six-month break from work just because she had given birth. She could have a week or 10 days off, then it was back into the harness with the foal tagging along when she was hitched to plow, wagon, or some other horse-drawn farm implement.

The mare also would be expected to continue working right up to parturition. I can remember my father telling stories of farmers unhitching a mare in the field and hustling her back to the barn because she was going into labor. He also told stories about stallion owners who would travel the countryside in a horse-drawn buggy, with the stallion tied behind. It wasn't unusual, he said, for a farmer to unhitch a mare which was in heat and have the stallion cover her on the spot. She then would return to work and the stallion would continue down the road.

I have no information on what effect these approaches had on conception rates and foal survivability. They were approaches necessitated by circumstances. It took a fair amount of hay and grain to keep a draft horse in good working condition, and that horse had to pay for its keep by toiling in the field to produce crops that enabled the farmer to support his family.

Tractors have replaced horses in agricultural America, and the equine today has become an animal used for pleasure riding and in a wide variety of competitive events. There still are some farmers who choose to till the soil with horses, but it is a matter of choice on their part rather than necessity. In parts of the West, saddle horses are used to gather cattle in the fall from mountainous terrain and broad, sweeping prairies. But, again, this often is a matter of choice rather than necessity. To the chagrin of ranchers who hold fast to the old ways, the advent of the four-wheel all-terrain vehicle has taken over many of the saddle horse's duties.

What all this means is that there are few occasions where an owner must put a broodmare back to work soon after delivering a foal. However, there also are a number of instances where it is advantageous to do so. Maybe the mare is a valuable show horse and to continue her quest for a title or award, she must return as soon as possible to competition.

Just how soon that will be after the mare gives birth will vary. A number of factors are involved, including the mare's temperament, whether she is to be re-bred, and, of course, circumstances involving the birth, such as whether it was a normal presentation or whether dystocia or reproductive injury was involved.

In some instances, foals are weaned early. In other instances, the foal is hauled to the show, but is kept in a stall while the mare performs. This can have detrimental effects if the foal should become agitated while in a strange environment and away from its dam. This is a time when temperament of mare and foal would figure into the decision.

Making decisions concern-ing when to put the broodmare back to work begins at the time of foaling. Was it a normal birth or were there problems involving dystocia and/or damage to the cervix or uterus? Did the mare accept the foal or did she fit into that unusual category of a mare which immediately rejected the newborn?

If the latter is the case, the decision-making process is easy. The owner is stuck with an orphan foal or

finding a nurse mare. The mare, after being given a short break to recover from giving birth, will be ready to go back to work.

The post-foaling problems that can have an influence on how soon the mare is ready to return to work involve physical damage or trauma to her body. Fitting into this category are such serious problems as prolapse of the uterus, uterine rupture, invagination of the uterine horn, uterine hemorrhage, or a tear in the cervix. All of these are serious problems and must have reached a complete stage of recovery before the broodmare can be put back to work or bred again.

In the case of uterine rupture, for instance, one of the treatment protocols involves a laparotomy--surgical incision through the flank--and surgical repair of the ruptured area. One would want to make certain that complete healing of the affected areas had occurred before allowing strenuous exercise. The same would be true of a uterine prolapse that required surgical intervention.

When a cervical tear occurs, the prime concern involves getting it repaired so that the mare can continue to be a broodmare. In one study at Texas A&M, it was found that the pregnancy rate for mares with cervical tears that had been repaired surgically was 75%. It also was found that a number of mares in the study suffered a cervical tear in later pregnancies.

What all this means is that if the broodmare is to remain a broodmare and has complications during the birthing process, the number one goal normally is to solve the problem so that she can become pregnant again. In most cases, putting the mare back to work is secondary at that point.

However, if there are no birthing-related problems, the decision-making process can take a different turn.

Alternative Birth

Of course, one way in which the broodmare can continue at work uninterrupted and have a foal is via embryo transfer. Other than a brief period when she is in the breeding shed to be teased, bred, and the embryo recovered, she can continue to be involved in whatever discipline has been chosen for her.

However, embryo transfer remains relatively costly for the average horse owner, and a recipient mare is required. It does provide a viable option for that stellar show horse. She can be kept in competition and, at the same time, pass on those valuable genes.

Work Schedules

Let's assume that you decided against embryo transfer. The mare has delivered a normal foal, and you want to get her back into a chosen activity as soon as possible. How soon can you do this?

There are no blanket answers. It will vary case by case, mare by mare, foal by foal.

In some instances, it is possible to do as the aforementioned farmers did and allow the foal to tag along. Here is a case where temperament would figure into the equation. If the mare is a trail horse, it might be possible to allow the foal to run along beside her, providing that the mare is a calm, relaxed individual. If she is not and becomes agitated every time the foal isn't at her side, it would make for an unpleasant outing.

There are other dangers involved with this approach. Foals which are several weeks of age and older become quite bold and are extremely curious. They might, for example, stray into a ditch where barbed wire lies hidden beneath the grass.

There also is the danger when riding in a group that some of the other trail horses might take a dim view of a youngster trotting up behind them and lash out with a back foot. The result can be serious injury to the foal.

If you choose to take the foal along for trail riding, one should exercise care concerning the company in

which one is riding and be especially cautious concerning terrain. The best of all worlds in this approach is to be riding across smooth prairie, without fences and other obstacles, so that the youngster can run and frolic without danger of injury.

Some owners carry this approach a step further and take mare and foal to a horse show. This, too, can be a good news/bad news scenario. If the mare doesn't become excited when separated from the foal, she can be taken from the stall, shown, and returned. Of course, much also depends on the temperament of the foal. If it becomes highly agitated when left alone in the stall, there always is the danger of self-injury. Or, in some instances, it might be the foal which is shown.

It goes without saying that the mare's temperament will determine whether this is a worthwhile approach. If she is overly concerned about her foal, she is not going to provide rider or handler with a good performance. Same for the foal.

Some years ago when my wife and I were showing halter horses, I had an unpleasant experience with separating a mare and her foal at a horse show. The foal was about three months of age, and the show was in our home town, so we decided to show the foal in a weanling halter class.

I had separated mare and foal at home while teaching the youngster the rudiments of being presented at halter. It hadn't been a problem; the mare would whinny a few times, but that was about it. It was totally different at the horse show. Just being there seemed to agitate the mare.

When I led the foal from the stall, she began whinnying and charging about. To prevent damage, I tied her and led the youngster to the show ring. Instead of settling down, the mare became more and more agitated. I returned after the class and led the foal back to the stall. As I stepped inside, the mare had her rear end to me. Without warning she lashed out with both back feet. One of them whizzed past my right leg, but the other landed flush on the fleshy part of my left thigh.

The stiffness and soreness reminded me for some days afterward that not every mare and foal should be taken to a horse show. It continued to remind me that I had made a basic error when entering the stall. I should have made sure the mare was facing me before entering.

Early Weaning

One should be aware that the temperament manifested in home surroundings can change radically when in a strange environment. So, we return to the basic question. We have a healthy mare which has recovered from giving birth, and we want to get her back into action. How soon can we do this if we don't want to take the foal along when she competes or is ridden for pleasure?

One answer is early weaning. Again, a number of factors should be considered.

In bygone days, an orphan foal or one which had to be weaned at a very early age often succumbed or didn't develop properly. There are stories of orphan foals being raised successfully on cow's milk, but there are far more reports of those foals not developing properly.

Today, that has changed. Modern technology has presented us with equine milk substitutes that allow an orphaned or early-weaned foal to grow and develop as fast or faster than a foal which is nursing.

The traditional time to wean foals used to be six months of age. That is still a viable option, but if one wants to put the broodmare back to work as soon as possible, that time can be cut in half without serious side effects, providing the foal is placed on an appropriate diet.

Normally, says Dave Beckman, DVM, a practitioner in the Louisville, Ky., area, a mare's milk peaks in richness and nutrients at about 12 weeks and goes downhill from there as far as quality is concerned. This means, he says, that a foal can be weaned at three months of age without detrimental side effects, providing that it is eating hay and grain and that it is placed on an appropriate diet.

M. Phyllis Lose, VMD, author of the companion books, *Blessed Are The Foals* and *Blessed Are The*

Broodmares, takes it a step further. She contends that it would be of benefit to the youngsters if all foals were weaned at 10 weeks of age, providing that they were placed on an appropriate milk substitute and a balanced hay and grain diet.

She contends that with today's milk substitutes, along with feeds that are produced precisely for foals, the hand-raised foal often surpasses those raised by mares as to size and development at equal ages.

To Breed, Or Not To Breed?

Still another matter to be considered when deciding how soon the broodmare can return to work involves breeding. If the mare is to be rebred, it can have a profound influence on the decision.

Again, there is no simple answer when this question is involved. This approach, too, must be made on a case-by-case basis. Is the mare one which readily shows heat, ovulates, and becomes pregnant without undue difficulty? Or, is she one who has "silent heat" and detecting her ovulation is tricky? How about hormone levels? Are they adequate or must they be supplemented?

How one answers those questions is significant. Let's assume that the mare is an easy breeder which shows heat and ovulates on schedule. If she is also a mare which doesn't become agitated when the foal is trotting along beside her on a trail ride or when traveling to a horse show with her, she could be returned to work a few weeks after foaling with no negative consequences for rebreeding.

However, if she requires reproductive therapy or fails to show heat, one would only complicate matters by allowing her to return to work, even though her temperament may permit it.

The first 60 days of a pregnancy can be difficult for a mare, Beckman says, because that is a time when her body is undergoing some fundamental changes in preparing to carry a foal to term. If she is being administered medications for any reason, he adds, it can further complicate the picture.

Earlier, we talked about early weaning of a foal and providing it with the proper nutrition. The same is true of a mare which is lactating, working, and carrying a developing fetus. This is a three-way drain on her nutritional resources. The mare which is working, nursing a foal, and carrying another will have high energy requirements that must be met to avoid possible long-term health complications.

It seems logical to conclude that broodmares can return to work quite soon after delivering a foal, providing that there are no birthing complications and that they are temperamentally capable. For those which don't meet the temperament criteria, there is the option of weaning the foal at 10 to 12 weeks of age.

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We would be remiss, however, if we didn't look at the other end of the spectrum--how long can the mare be kept in strenuous activity before she foals again.

Beckman is of the opinion that the magic cutoff time should be at about seven months of gestation. The prime reason, he says, is that most growth occurs in the final trimester. At six months of pregnancy, the fetus is only about the size of a cat, he explains, but in the months that follow, it grows very rapidly.

Many foals, he says, weigh in at 125 pounds when born. When this is coupled with additional water weight, it might mean that the mare has gained about 250 pounds. In addition to the extra weight, he says, her center of gravity has shifted to the rear, producing more strain on abdominal muscles.

To ask a mare to perform under those circumstances, he says, would be much like asking a ballerina who has ballooned from 98 to 140 pounds to perform as effectively at the heavier weight.

Once the mare has given birth and she is healthy enough to return to work, special care must be taken to ease her back into a training regimen. As Beckman previously explained, extreme strain has been

placed on the mare's abdominal muscles during the pregnancy and in the last days of gestation, and she likely received very little exercise during that time. That means light, easy works should be the order of the day in the early going of her retraining, taking into consideration her conditioning before pregnancy and parturition.

**Readers are cautioned to seek the advice of a qualified veterinarian
before proceeding with any diagnosis, treatment, or therapy.**



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