

# BEFORE YOU BREED YOUR MARE

By Linda White

*If you've been breeding horses for years, there is probably very little you haven't seen or thought about, both economically and philosophically. If you're a relative newcomer to the horse biz, however, breeding your mare may be unfamiliar territory. Please read on. The following may help shed a glimmer of light on the age-old mystery.*

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**Y**ou were sure when you bought your American Saddlebred mare that exciting adventures lay n store for you. Following good advice, you bought a promising individual who seemed perfectly suited to your needs. She was pretty, she had a wonderful disposition and her bloodlines, you were assured, were highly desirable. Whether your original objective was riding or driving, show or strictly pleasure, she has been just the ticket.

Now that she has succeeded in the role you chose for her - which may have been anything from winning a Five-Gaited World's Grand Championship to becoming your daughter's 4-H project - people with more experience than you keep suggesting that you ought to breed her. Breed your mare? Raise a foal? That sounds like another exciting adventure, but horse breeding is as unfamiliar to you as horse ownership was not all that long ago. You may have very little idea of what to expect. How can you know whether that's the right next step?

Talk to experienced breeders, talk to other people like you who have been through breeding their mare, and read, read, read everything you can find about the subject of breeding. Just remember that in his book *Breeding The Race Horse*, legendary Thoroughbred breeder Federico Tesio does add a caveat about relying on reading alone as the basis for your expertise.

"I thought I knew, but the truth was that in spite of all I had seen and read, I had not yet learned to reflect - to reflect, that is, on the whys and wherefores." Take heed and seriously reflect on your answers to the following questions before deciding whether breeding your mare is the right choice for you.

**F**or more than 5,000 years, mankind has found horse breeding to be one of the most joyful, satisfying undertakings imaginable. It's also a long-term commitment. Studying, making decisions, awaiting the foal's birth, the birth experience itself, interacting with the animals, then raising, training, and perhaps showing your foal yourself can be a rewarding, unforgettable lifetime experience for both children and adults. If your short-term intention is merely to provide an interesting experience for your family, however, or to recoup some of the money you've spent, neither may be a valid reason for breeding your mare.

If you and your family have a genuine desire to become involved, and are willing to invest something of yourselves, as well as sensible expenditures of your financial resources, breeding your mare may enrich your life immeasurably. Horse breeding is a serious commitment that demands time, effort and expense. If you feel fully committed, and thrilled with the prospect of expanding your involvement with the American Saddlebred breed, the decision to breed your mare could turn out to be one of the best moves you've ever made.

For most Saddlebred breeders, the next step after breeding your mare and raising her foal is showing the offspring. Prize monies approaching \$1 million are available each year in a variety of state and national futurity programs especially for American Saddlebreds. Information about these programs, which include futurities, sweepstakes, the Breeders' Award and the American Saddlebred Grand National (*discontinued in 2012*), is available from the American Saddlebred Horse Association. While the horse business, like most businesses, has few guarantees, showing your foal can be exciting, lots of fun, even financially rewarding.

Keep your head, and before you breed, seriously consider the following questions:

### IS YOUR MARE FREE OF INHERITED DEFECTS?

Every breed of horse has faults, some of which are highly inheritable. Conformational defects, both major and minor, may pale when compared to hemophilia, cerebellar hypoplasia, and fatal inherited genes like Epitheliogenesis imperfecta, or the lethal white gene that can occur when two black-and-white overo spotted horses are mated. Your mare may appear to be fine, but some times inherited problems can be found only by special examination. Consult your veterinarian and follow his or her recommendations regarding examination and detection of any inherited abnormalities that could be present. Also check with the owners of any stallions you may be considering. When a mare and stallion who carry the same genetic defect are mated, the defect's occurrence in their offspring is dramatically increased. The heartache of producing a defective foal can easily be avoided if you do your homework conscientiously.

### WHAT ARE YOUR PLANS?

The business of conception, pregnancy and foal rearing will interrupt the relationship you may have with your mare. If she's your prized show horse, or your constant companion and trail buddy, are you prepared to be without the use of her for awhile? Minimally, her pregnancy will interrupt her career as a performance horse. A foal at foot for three or four months can also be a deterrent to her usefulness as a show or pleasure horse. You may find that regaining your mare's fitness and girlish figure after you've weaned her foal is no insignificant task, either. Nonetheless, just as most folks willingly accept the inconveniences of human pregnancy in light of its ultimate reward, interrupting your mare's usefulness under saddle or in harness may be only a minor inconvenience.

### DOES YOUR LIFESTYLE ALLOW IT?

Studying pedigrees, reading up on genetics and care of mares and foals, asking questions of more experienced breeders, watching videos and going to see the stallions you're considering can consume weeks and months of any spare time you might have. In most cases, the acceptance by the American Saddlebred Registry of foals conceived by transported semen will eliminate the need for you to ship your mare to the stallion of choice.

However, your mare will need pre-and post-breeding veterinary visits from your equine practitioner, and serious attention to - and a thorough understanding of - her estrus or "heat" cycles. It's a fascinating subject, but it's also an essential one whose importance cannot be discounted or overlooked. If at all possible, you will want to select an equine practitioner; that is, a "horse vet" whose specialties include equine reproduction and artificial insemination. Horses have a lower conception rate than, say, cattle or dogs, and the costs associated with each shipment of semen can soon grow to be prohibitive if your veterinarian is unfamiliar with or inexperienced in the procedures essential to your mare's becoming pregnant.

If your mare has ever been bred or had a foal before in her life, your veterinarian will need to take a swab for a uterine culture and sensitivity test. The presence of any bacterial, viral, protozoa! or fungal infection in your mare's uterus will keep her from conceiving. Your veterinarian will know how to effectively treat any infection a uterine culture may reveal.

You will also need to rely on your veterinarian to determine the timing related to when your mare should be bred. You may need to ship your mare, complete with a current health certificate, to the stallion of choice. There, she will be bred either by natural cover, or by artificial insemination. If transported semen is to be the breeding method, your mare need never get on the bus. You will want your veterinarian to infuse the mare at the optimum time of estrus, preferably just before she ovulates. An ultrasound exam on day 16 will let you know whether your mare has "settled." If so, your vet will want to repeat the ultrasound at regular intervals to be sure your mare remains in foal. If she hasn't settled, or reabsorbs her embryo, call up the stallion's manager and prepare to make a code run to the nearest airport (because semen is shipped counter-to counter).



If your mare lives under your care, you will want to be thoroughly educated about her changing nutritional needs as the pregnancy progresses. "Foal watch" is a wonderful, exciting time, but it often means a few sleepless nights. Vigilant monitoring of your mare as parturition approaches is also a good idea. Foaling itself is pretty miraculous, so you will want to be present if at all possible. If your mare is stabled at a facility away from your home, be sure that her increased nutritional needs are met, and that an experienced, competent horse caregiver familiar with the foaling process is on hand.

Whether your mare and foal are in a field right outside your dining room window or at a farm 1,000 miles away, be sure the nursery facilities are safe and adequate. A clean, spacious, quiet environment with minimal confusion is most desirable, as most mothers, horse or human, are anxious and protective of their newborn infants. (Remember that we're all mammals.) If your mare was a "maiden" and this is her first foal, she may at first be frantic and overprotective, or apprehensive and reluctant to "mother" the mysterious little stranger who smells like her.

Speaking of odors, volumes have been written about foaling and the care of mares and foals, so if you plan to be present, read up prior to the blessed event. Familiarize yourself with what to expect. Do not - repeat - do not give the foal a bath the minute it's out of the sac. Allow the mare to clean the foal herself. It is her odor on the damp newborn foal that tells her this is hers. Bathing the foal removes the mare's scent and your new mother will - guaranteed - reject her foal.

### CAN YOU AFFORD IT?

Just as the costs associated with having children make many couples hesitate, breeding your mare and raising a foal won't be a freebie, either. The basic expenses: stud fee, shipping and mare care or costs associated with transported semen, veterinary care and nutritional (and perhaps stabling) extras will vary somewhat depending on your circumstances, where the mare and foal will live, and so forth. If your mare and her foal are boarded, remember that the foal will begin eating creep feed (a nutritious, easily digested grain mixture especially for babies) after a few weeks, and that the minute the foal is weaned, he or she will represent an additional board bill. If you keep your mare at home, her foal will soon represent another mouth to feed. There will be an additional veterinary bill from the moment he or she sees the light of day, and of course, there will be the farrier... While you shouldn't be faced with expensive orthodontia, a senior year abroad or the cost of a college education, horses do represent certain ongoing expenses.

Are you willing and able to underwrite such costs without any guarantee of recompense? You may plan to market and sell the foal, but it may be months or even years before you see a dime. The money you spend may not amount to much in the beginning, but neither do you want your exciting adventure into horse breeding to wreak havoc with your budget. The phrase "horse poor" isn't rooted in myth. Can you afford to keep both mare and foal?

### CAN YOU PART WITH THE FOAL?

Despite your best intentions, you may find that actually selling this wonderful creature you have nurtured along for these many months (or years) is easier said than done. If young children are part of your particular equation, parting with your mare's baby may be especially painful.

Assessing buyers, pricing the foal and being willing to stand behind your "product" are other elements you'll have to face if you do elect to sell at some point. Also keep in mind that, like a child maturing into adulthood, the older your foal gets, the more those expenses will accrue.

As you can see, breeding your mare is a responsibility that should not be taken lightly. In addition to the expense, it also means bringing a live animal that may live 30 years or more into this crowded world. For many people throughout history, breeding horses was and remains a gloriously rewarding, joyful way of life: the stuff of which dreams are made, but only you can make that decision for yourself. First reflect, as breeder Federico Tesio cautioned, on the whys and wherefores.



Photos by Jamie Donaldson