

Love and Devotion Help Special Filly Beat the Odds

BY ROBIN STANBACK

To anyone who has ever loved a horse, every healthy foal is a miracle. It is a joy and a wonder to watch them stand on their wobbly legs, take their first tentative steps, and find their first meal. While the vast majority of foals born every year find their way into the world in the usual fashion, occasionally a foal will arrive that provides a new definition for the word miracle.

Three years ago a unique filly lifted the spirits and conquered the hearts of all who came in contact with her. In the words of her veterinarian, "She had two chances to live, slim and none," and yet she overcame the odds. She was not born of the bluest bloodlines in a multimillion-dollar barn with facilities and personnel to care for early or sick foals. Instead, she entered the world, at least eight weeks prematurely, in a pasture. Her only assistants were her owners who had never before experienced foaling a mare on their own.

Brad and Betsy Waters were newcomers to the horse business when Ms. Waters suffered a riding injury that would force her to endure a lengthy recuperation. Rather than give up on a lifelong interest, Ms. Waters considered putting her riding horse to work as a broodmare. She and her husband selected a registered Paint stallion to breed to their Thoroughbred mare. Another mare, in foal to the same stallion, caught their eyes and they purchased her as an additional broodmare.

"We liked her size and disposition, and she was bred on June 8, six days before our mare, so their due dates would be very close. We knew it would also be a good thing for our foal to have company," Ms. Waters explained.

The mares progressed through the following months as expected with Midway, Kentucky veterinarian Rachel Pemstein, VMD, attending them on a regular basis to provide inoculations and advice. She said, "Betsy and Brad were both very thorough in their research and did everything possible to learn about the foaling process. Betsy is a very dedicated person, the kind that is meticulous about details. I had no doubts they would be as prepared as possible."

For all of their scrupulous preparations, the Waterses could not have anticipated the problem that occurred March 15. Ms. Waters explained, "The new mare developed a massive edema on the

underside of her belly. I thought the foal was dropping down abnormally in her abdomen or that, perhaps, she had a hernia. Of course, we called our vet immediately and she came out to examine the mare. Rachel indicated that the edema could be caused by circulatory problems in the unborn foal and that it was quite possible the mare would slip or abort the foal. She said there was little we could do but watch the mare carefully for signs that she was trying to go into labor. We knew the chances of the foal surviving were very slim. Most mares carry their foals 11 months and two weeks and this mare was just over eight months pregnant. Still, we hoped for the best."

Within five days the mare produced a steady stream of milk and, on March 22, the Waterses' worst fears were realized. "We had watched the mare constantly for three days. We took a short break to check out the back of the farm and when we returned she was lying down. We knew she was losing the foal. I ran for my foaling kit and Brad ran for the phone. We called Rachel immediately and she talked us through helping the mare deliver the foal. We were so concerned but Rachel was as steady as a rock," Ms. Waters stated.

"Squirt" in her specially designed sling.



Photo by Carl Stesser

Mr. Waters continued, "I didn't really have time to think about anything. I just reacted. After I pulled her out of the mare and helped her start breathing she whinnied and it just amazed us. My first thought was 'Oh boy, we have a horse!' Looking back on it, I should have known she was just too small but I didn't have much upon which to base a comparison. It wasn't until I saw the look on Rachel's face that I realized we might have some serious problems."

Dr. Pemstein said she was amazed to find the foal alive when she arrived shortly after the birth. She explained, "It is difficult to really pinpoint the exact gestation period of an individual horse, as each responds to its own timetable, but it is certainly safe to say this foal was at least six to eight weeks premature. I have seen foals born this early make it but, in 18 years of practice, most of it relating to equine reproduction, I have never seen such an immature foal. This foal might have weighed 30 pounds at the most. Her eyes weren't even open and she had a tiny nubbin for a tail. I was not optimistic. Very few foals born that prematurely survive and those require intense care."

She shared her concerns with her clients and explained some of the options available to them, including transporting the foal to a veterinary hospital where she could be placed in an equine neonatal unit or caring for the foal at home which would require a profound amount of work and long hours. Neither of these options could provide better than a limited prognosis. The Waterses' decision was to care for the foal themselves and they determined to do everything in their power to help her survive.

Prior to arriving at the farm, Dr. Pemstein had called a local veterinary hospital to prepare a dose of colostrum, an early first milk for newborns that contains many of the proteins and antibodies young animals need to protect their delicate systems. She had picked up the milk on her way to the farm and had it ready to administer to the tiny foal through a stomach tube upon the Waterses' request. Then she examined the mare to determine if she would

allow herself to be milked to provide the foal with a constant supply of mare's milk.

Mr. Waters stated, "I've never milked anything in my life let alone a 17 hand race horse that has never before had a baby. She was as good as gold and very patient with me. It took me a while to get the hang of it but then we did pretty well."

Dr. Pemstein drew blood from the foal to have analyzed and recommended that the Waterses keep her dry and warm and in a correct position to keep her lungs clear. She also directed them to feed the foal every two hours with a mare's milk replacement mix supplemented by milk their mare provided.

The work that began that evening was to last for an intense three and a half weeks of daily and, sometimes, twice a day visits by the veterinarian, every other hour milkings and feedings, laundry to keep up with the towels, sweaters, and blankets soiled by the foal, and endless trips between the house and barn with supplies. While friends and relatives kept a steady stream of support, food and love coming their way, the majority of the work and worry fell on the Waterses. Ms. Waters said, "We had no idea what we were getting into but, in retrospect, it would not have made any

difference if we had. We had friends who volunteered to foal sit but, really, we were so consumed by the responsibility and our love for this animal that we were afraid to leave her for even an hour."

Dr. Pemstein attributed the foal's success to the intense dedication the Waterses devoted to her care. "There are many factors that came together to help this foal survive. One was that she received the colostrum within an hour of her birth and that she was able to process it into her system. Another factor is that Betsy and Brad were with that baby every minute. They knew from hour to hour exactly how she was progressing. At the slightest hint of something going wrong, Betsy was on the phone calling to report. Another advantage was that the foal was kept in her own environment, a place for which she had natural



Photo by Roy Foeman

On her feet and learning to lead.

immunities. She also had contact with her mother, although not the normal foal to mare contact, but it was enough for the foal to know she was a horse and not some strange type of human. These things together with the fact that she had good blood counts right from the beginning helped to keep her alive. She was never a 'sick' foal, just an early one," Dr. Pemstein explained.

Another factor that helped to keep the foal progressing was a special sling built to help keep the filly upright and to relieve bed sores. Ms. Waters explained, "Our vet suggested that we find a way to get the filly off her sides and upright as many times a day and for as long as we could without exhausting her. Brad, my brother and a friend of ours built a wooden support structure and hung a bedspread over it on which to place the foal. She couldn't hold her head up so we had to support it at first but the bedspread worked for the rest of her. She could just touch the bottom of the support with her toes and her little legs would just wriggle away. It was priceless, really. It wasn't long before she could support her head and then she would even try to put some weight on her legs, too. I feel it really helped her tremendously."

For the first five weeks of her life the foal was carried from her bed of blankets to her sling and back again. She was even carried into the Waters' house on occasions when the temperature outside was too cold to keep her warm in the barn. "Even with her wearing my turtlenecks and sweatshirts covered with blankets and using a heat lamp, we couldn't always keep her warm enough so we would bring her into the house for the night to keep her warm," Ms. Waters explained.

She began to support her own weight at about five and a half weeks. Ms. Waters walked into the barn one day to find her standing on her own. Dr. Pemstein said, "Betsy called me and said, 'All on her own she just popped up,' and that was what I called her from that point on. She just was a Pop Tart!"

Like a well-loved child with many nicknames, Pop Tart was also called Little Bit, Peanut, Pumpkin, Black Velvet

and Squirt. She steadily progressed from a 30 pound whickering wonder, to a 500 pound playful yearling who was able to be a pasture mate for the foal for whom she was originally intended as a playmate. She had two bouts of colic that were immediately corrected. Dr. Pemstein said, "The amazing thing about Betsy and that foal is this connection they seem to have. The filly would go into a decline if Betsy went on vacation. Then, one night when Betsy and Brad were out for the evening Betsy decided she had to go home. She told me, 'I just knew something was wrong with Squirt and I had to get home.' Sure enough, the filly was colicking. We were able to treat her quickly and it cleared right up."

Squirt also developed epiphysitis which was, as everything else in her young life, carefully researched by her owners. Dr. Pemstein consulted with the nutritionists from Kentucky Equine Research (KER) to develop the optimum feeding program for Squirt and Ms. Waters followed their instructions to the letter. She laughed, "Squirt could be a poster child for KER."

Now as a sturdy three-year-old who, while still smaller than most, can keep up with her pasture mates, Squirt has found another calling in life. She has gone from being a well-

loved "child" to being a useful member of her farm family. Ms. Waters stressed, "If she does nothing else in her whole life but wean our foals and be a beautiful horse, that will be alright with me. We will have her legs x-rayed next year and evaluate her to see if she can possibly handle a child or an adult rider but that is far from being important to us. We love her just the way she is."

Dr. Pemstein says it was the Waterses' love and dedication to detail that brought Squirt to this place in her life. The Waterses attribute the filly's survival to a veterinarian whose expertise and willingness to work with them were unflinching. Mr. Waters felt there was another factor: "She wanted to live, desperately. Anything that wanted to live that badly deserved every chance we could give her." ∞



Photo by Robin Stanback

"Squirt" at three years of age now helps out as a pasture companion and weaning "nanny."