

New Program Provides Road Map for Tracking Growth

BY MARK LLEWELLYN

A conscientious breeder has done everything in his power to produce healthy young horses. He has enlisted the services of a top-notch nutritionist to evaluate his feeding program and a team of veterinarians to ensure the horses are maintained on an aggressive vaccination and deworming schedule. Every management decision is made to encourage sound growth. But can he determine how the growth of his young horses stacks up against that of other weanlings and yearlings? Sure, he can eyeball other breeders' horses, but in an industry that is depending more on technology and less on old-school methodologies, there is now a tool available to help secure slow, steady growth—an integral factor in reducing skeletal problems in young horses.

Gro-Trac is an equine growth tracking program that allows breeders to contrast the growth rates of their stock with those of other young horses. Joe Pagan, president of Kentucky Equine Research, laid the foundation for Gro-Trac more than a decade ago when he and Steve Caddel of Farmers Feed Mill began measuring young horses throughout central Kentucky. The information Pagan and Caddel amassed over the years was compiled into a vast database and represents the core of the software.

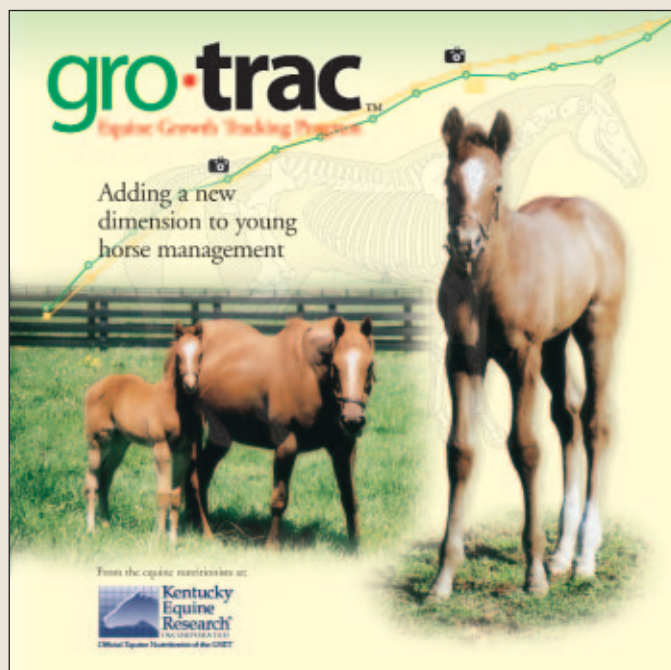
The database is arranged in reference groups and includes the weights, heights, and average daily gains of thousands of foals,

weanlings, and yearlings. By using Gro-Trac, horsemen can compare the growth of their young horses with the growth patterns of thousands of horses in a particular reference group. Suppose, for example, a Thoroughbred breeder would like to know how his weanling fillies born in January are faring in comparison to other weanlings of similar age. He would select the reference group labeled "Fillies, Thoroughbreds, Born in January, Located in KY."

Within seconds of inputting height and weight data, these statistics are displayed graphically for prompt visual assessment of growth. Line graphs show the growth curve for the young horse as well as the reference group of choice, and bar charts depict average daily gain comparisons. Once growth curves are studied, an appropriate management decision can be made regarding the way the youngster will be fed in the future. For instance, if a precocious individual is growing by leaps

and bounds when compared to its peers in the reference group, the breeder may choose to slow growth by decreasing the amount of energy in the diet.

In addition to growth data, photographs can be imported into the program to show physical changes that occur between weighings. Management notes can also be added at any time. Such comments may be necessary to explain a slowdown in growth such as following weaning or during an illness. Symbols signifying the presence of a photograph or comment will appear on the graphs. These features create an ongoing history of each foal. Easy-to-read, customized reports can then be printed from the program.



Farm managers agree that Gro-Trac is an objective management instrument. "We can spot red-flag babies quickly. It is easy to miss subtle changes when you see these young horses every day, but Gro-Trac catches them. In other cases, the program validates thoughts we have had about a horse. We can use this information if something should happen down the road," said Nick Lotz, owner and manager of Briarbrooke Farm, a Thoroughbred nursery in Paris, Kentucky.

Gro-Trac has proven to be an irreplaceable tool for commercial boarding operations with out-of-town clients. About three-quarters of Lotz's clients, for instance, do not regularly visit the farm. Gro-Trac allows Lotz to send these

clients detailed accounts of their horses that may include growth curves, photographs, and even pertinent comments from the individuals who handle the horses daily.

The program is equally useful to the caretakers of horses on privately owned farms. The crop of yearlings residing at Henryk de Kwiatkowski's Calumet Farm are the first horses on the farm to be followed by Gro-Trac from birth. Tony Cissell, the general manager of Calumet Farm, uses Gro-Trac to assess growth and to head off problems. "Having this program is like having Doppler radar. I haven't had any storms yet, but I'm ready to catch them quickly if something should happen."

No other management tool monitors growth as completely as Gro-Trac. The creation of Gro-Trac represents the melding of old-fashioned horse sense and modern technology, and use of this software fine-tunes the management of young horses as never before. ■