

T spend my professional life writing about horse nutrition or some aspect thereof. General interest articles, brochures, feed tags, feed bags: if it can benefit a feed manufacturer, I've probably written it. Oftentimes I do not have a personal interest in the matter. I've never fed rice bran, for instance, but I can tell you its benefits. I've never owned a horse with exertional rhabdomyolysis, but I am able to offer up some nutritional tips that may prevent a horse from tying-up. Every now and then I delve into a topic I know little about at the onset, but after hours of Internet and library research and the occasional interview, I manage to put together what I hope to be an informative piece. But simply spewing facts and instructions for horse owners is nothing like experiencing firsthand the awkward and sometimes terrifying moments of horse ownership. So, I offer this simple story about me, Mark Llewellyn, and my mare Skean.

Skean, a chestnut with an elongated star and two white socks, is my 20-year-old Thoroughbred. Though she was not a standout on the racetrack or the dam of a stakes winner, her sturdy, correct conformation and amiable disposition would lend itself well to my appendix Quarter Horse breeding program.

While Skean was a veteran broodmare by the time she entered my life, I had only bred her one other time. On that occasion, in 2001, I sent her to a reputable breeding farm to foal, and unfortunately that pregnancy ended in a profound dystocia and a dead foal. I decided not to breed her in 2001, allowing her time instead to recover from the trauma of the difficult birth. In 2002, I bred her to an athletic, structurally correct Quarter Horse stallion with the hope of producing a show hunter for myself.

By March 26, the old chestnut mare was overdue, three weeks overdue in fact. Because of my complete lack of knowledge in the mysterious and sometimes nebulous field of equine reproduction, I had dutifully shipped the mare to more capable hands a month prior to her projected foaling date, originally pegged to be March 7. And when I say capable hands, I mean extraordinarily qualified. Those hands belong to two friends, one who spent years as a technician in the intensive care unit at a well-known equine hospital and one who is a respected veterinarian whose practice essentially revolves around hundreds of Thoroughbred broodmares. Needless to say, experience was on my side, even if it wasn't my own.

The habits of parturient mares are as individual as the markings, whorls of hair, and chestnuts they possess. If ever there was a mare that could turn on and off the behaviors labeled by textbooks as "imminent signs of foaling," it was Skean.

Welcome Shout—

It's about time!



Photo by Mark Llewellyn

As Skean's foaling date approached, she was tucked away nightly in her spacious straw-bedded stall. Her udder began to distend, increasing ever-so-slightly, on a daily basis. The anticipated foaling date came and went without nary a sign of a little one. Almost two weeks after her due date, a watershed moment occurred on the morning of March 20; Skean had waxed the previous night. Prior to foaling, mares develop a wax-like substance on the end of each teat. The honey-colored droplets are historically a surefire sign of looming birth. Now, I thought to myself, we were getting somewhere.

Beginning that evening I began camping out in a loft that overlooked Skean's stall. Camping out is a bit of an exaggeration. The heated loft was actually full of amenities including a cushy bed, television, and most importantly, an observation window. A bathroom, complete with shower, was only a few footsteps away. And to be perfectly candid, it's not as though I spent every moment of every night from this moment on with eyes affixed on Skean. My friends own a Breeder Alert system. This monitoring device was designed based on the fact that most mares lie on their sides prior to and during foaling. When foaling is thought to be near, the mare is outfitted with a transmitter that is attached to the underside of her halter. If and when the mare lies flat out, as if to foal, the transmitter sends a signal to a repeater, which in turn sends another signal to a pocket-sized pager. Although false alarms occasionally occur, the system does allow for some shut-eye in the wee hours. Every foal watch attendant should have it so lucky!

By the next morning, however, Skean was no longer waxed up. The vigil continued through March 25 with little changing except for the size of her bag, which seemed to be extending a bit more each day. On this morning, the attend-

ing veterinarian decided to palpate Skean to ascertain the position of the foal. Fortunately, he found the foal in a relatively normal position. While the head rested between the forelegs as in a normal presentation, the body was a bit skewed to one side. This slight malposition could easily be corrected by the mare during labor, and I was told this was not a major concern.

To further soothe my anxiety, a second veterinarian arrived later in the day to perform transabdominal ultrasonography, a diagnostic technique frequently performed on mares experiencing unusually long gestation periods. Assessment of fetal well-being is determined through measurement of heart rate, thickness of the fetal membranes, and quality and quantity of allantoic and amniotic fluids. While the veterinarian found a healthy heart beat of 70 beats per minute and normal fluids, he did note some thickening and premature separation of the placenta. Because of the mare's age and the number of full-term pregnancies she has endured over the years (at least ten that I know of), he did not consider this finding too worrisome.

Skean remained busy throughout the morning of March 25. My friend kept a tally of the number of times she laid down and her best estimate was 19. From all outward appearances, the mare was obviously becoming more and more uncomfortable. As morning turned to midday, Skean returned to grazing casually with her pasturemate. The vigil on the evening of March 25 offered only one false alarm and the mare was up before I could make my way from the bed to the observation window.

By the morning of March 26, however, Skean was producing plenty of milk, so much so that it streamed from her teats all morning long and coated her hind legs. In typical fashion, however, the stream ebbed and Skean went about her day in her usual lackadaisical way, grazing nonchalantly as if nothing out of the ordinary was about to happen. Although I should have been encouraged by this latest development, I wasn't. It had been five days since Skean first waxed and she had spent the previous day in obvious discomfort. I was convinced that this release of milk was yet another trick Skean plucked from her arsenal to frustrate me. In fact, I was sure she would never, *ever* have this foal!

I arrived at my foal-watch station on the evening of March 26 at about 9:45 p.m. By this time, Skean had completely finished her evening meal and was circling the perimeter of her stall. There was nothing frantic in her movements, only a general sense of unease. I watched patiently for about 20 minutes. Because I was fairly sure the moment I had been waiting so impatiently for had finally arrived, I immediately called my friend to the scene. She sneaked into the barn quietly and watched Skean intently.

In what seemed like a moment of complete resignation, the mare found the center of the stall and dropped heavily onto the straw. My friend slipped into the stall, wrapped her



Measuring Shout

Shout had his first encounter with a portable equine scale six days after he was born. With his dam overseeing the goings-on, Shout finally consented to standing quietly on the scale. He weighed in at 145.2 pounds. According to data compiled by Kentucky Equine Research over the last twelve years, Shout weighs only slightly more than 141.5, the average weight of colts born in Kentucky during March at six days of age.

Kentucky Equine Research developed Gro-Trac in 2002 to monitor the height and weight of foals. By ensuring steady growth with Gro-Trac, foals often dodge orthopedic problems that are brought about by accelerated growth.

Check the next issue of Equineews to see how Shout's growth is stacking up against other foals!



tail quickly, and felt inside the mare to be sure the foal was in the correct position. She looked up at me with a distraught expression and instructed me to get her husband, the veterinarian, out of bed...NOW. I bolted to the house and awoke him. He made it to the barn within a minute or so and calmly, methodically assessed the situation. The foal, he said, was flipped on its back. After ten minutes of trying, unsuccessfully, to reposition the foal, he asked me to ready the truck and trailer for an emergency departure.

Within minutes, the mare was loaded and we were on our way to Hagyard-Davidson-McGee Veterinary Clinic, located just outside of Lexington. A quick glance at the clock in the truck revealed it was nearly 10:30 p.m. The on-call veterinarian, Dr. Paul Thorpe, had been notified and would be waiting for our arrival. During the ride to the veterinary clinic, all I could imagine was losing yet another foal. You see, my track record to this point was not encouraging. I've managed only one live foal from three pregnancies with three different broodmares.

Twenty minutes after leaving the farm, we unloaded the mare and led her quickly into the hospital stall. Dr. Thorpe wasted little time in sizing up the situation. After commenting that the foal was quite large, he looped chains around the foal's front fetlocks and, with the assistance of another veterinarian, began pulling. Progress was slow in the beginning, but then I heard Dr. Thorpe utter, in almost a whisper, the most promising words of the evening, "I think this one's alive."

As is always the case in times of uncertainty, minutes seemed like hours. I remember looking at the clock and thinking to myself, "This is taking so long-too long," but, of course, what did I know about dystocias? The white-faced wall clock read 11:07 p.m. Just a few minutes after thinking this, however, I heard Skean heave, and with that effort, a chestnut colt made a sudden and slippery entrance into this world.

Skean, completely exhausted, lay motionless on the floor, breathing deeply. Milk once again flowed from her udder. Meanwhile, the veterinarians resuscitated the foal and gave him a thorough once-over, declaring him healthy except for a few fractured ribs. Skean gently rolled onto her chest, folded her legs underneath her, and offered the softest, most endearing nicker any mare could possibly bestow.

Approximately ten minutes later Skean rose, and the veterinarians suggested we take her and her colt, now christened Shout, to a warm stall where he would be better able to get his footing to stand, or at least try to!

In his stall, Shout made several attempts to stand before Dr. Thorpe arrived on the scene once again. He gave Shout a healthy dose of colostrum through a nasogastric tube, reassurance that he received sufficient antibodies. I am not sure if the colostrum energized Shout, but within minutes of receiving it, he was on his feet for the first time in his life. While finding his feet wasn't difficult for the colt, locating the udder proved to be most troublesome. Eventually, however, he found the faucet and all was well.

The weather in central Kentucky has, for the most part, been gorgeous and spring-like since Shout's birth, and the pastures have responded accordingly. Seemingly overnight, fields that were once brown and barren are now green and ripe with plentiful grasses. Skean and Shout, however, are not able to soak in the spring sunlight as the colt has been relegated to his stall for at least two weeks and perhaps longer while his broken ribs knit. Had his fractures been less severe, he would be able to be turned out, but his are comminuted and require stall rest to mend properly.

In just a few weeks, the little chestnut colt will have acres and acres at his disposal to bounce, play, and run. I've got big plans for him, so now's the time for him to grow and become strong. ☺☺