

OCEAN PEARL

"In Spring The Foals Arrive"



Spring is the best season, for many reasons. The obvious is the effect of mother natures' warm breath on all living things, breathing new life, color and beauty. To me one of the most special aspects of spring is the birth of foals. They arrive so quietly, usually in the night, and so quickly adapt to their surroundings and bond to their mother. It is a fortunate thing to be able to witness such a miracle, and to occasionally assist in the process. As an equine veterinarian, I have had the opportunity to do so many times. Now, as spring approaches I recall one such event that was marred with both tragedy and wonder.

The mare's name was Marika. She was an 11 year old Thoroughbred and this was to be her first foal. Her owners were the Johnson family. The father, Robert, is a surgeon. Susan is the mother and they have four wonderful children. The Johnson's are horse people. All of them ride. Dad and the sons play polo. Susan and the girls ride in 3-day events, jump and are active members of Pony Club. This was to be the family's first foal as well.

The previous spring I had artificially inseminated the mare and had also confirmed the pregnancy. I remember showing them the foal's heartbeat on the screen of the ultrasound machine, 28 days into the pregnancy, a living being so secure in its' mothers' womb. The stallion was Hannoverian, black and white, and beautiful. I had seen the mare a couple of times during the year and all appeared well. She was getting larger as the months went by. She was due to foal in late May.

On May 14th, early in the morning, I received an urgent call from Mrs. Johnson. There was horror in her voice as she spoke. When she went down to feed she had found Marika standing but sweating and shivering, her left hind leg pointing outward, in the wrong direction, obviously broken. I could hear children crying in the background. I

told her I would be right there. Before I left my office I checked the record to see how far along Marika was in her gestation; 329 days, just long enough, that, with luck, the foal could survive.

As I pulled into the Johnson's farm I saw Susan and the children heading toward the house. Susan stopped and yelled that she had to get the kids to school, and that Robert was with the mare in a pen behind the barn. I pulled around the end of the barn and immediately saw that Marika, although standing, was in shock and that indeed her leg was fractured; it had an unnatural inward bend in the middle of the gaskin area and the lower part of the leg was turned out in an unnatural direction. She was lightly resting that limb on the ground in an uncovered pen that was about 24' x 24'. I walked up to her, stroked her forehead and neck and moved my hand over her croup and down her leg.

As I reached the mid gaskin area she lifted the leg off the ground and it swung too freely under her body. She braced herself on her three other legs. During this brief moment I could feel bone grating on bone, crepitation, which is present when a bone is broken. There were no wounds or abrasions on the skin. Robert said they had brought her in from the large pasture about a week before because she was getting close to her due date and because they had seen her fighting with another mare. There had been a hoof print in that area of the leg at that time but she had shown no lameness or pain. We surmised from this that perhaps the kick resulted in a hairline fracture of the gaskin bone, and that this may have progressed to a complete fracture during the night from the forces put on the bone while getting up.

This conjecture didn't matter now. We had to deal with what we had. I continued to examine her and said to Robert,

"There is virtually no way to repair this fracture. Our only option, besides putting her to sleep now, is to save the foal. There is no colostrum present in the mare's udder. Her cervix is not dilated. Inducing her to deliver the foal now would only give us a premature foal. Besides, we need time to arrange for a surrogate dam. If you're willing to try, we can splint and stabilize the leg. We can give her a medication to accelerate the foals' maturation and hope for a vaginal delivery within 5-7 days. After the foal is born we'll have to put the mare down and then graft her foal onto the surrogate. It's a bit of a long shot and we'll have to be ready for complications."

"Let's try it", Robert said."

I instilled an i.v. catheter in Marika's jugular vein and began administering fluids to combat the shock and dehydration that were so apparent. I gave other medications to decrease swelling and minimize pain. While doing this she stood there stoically. I couldn't help but question whether we were doing the right thing. She had sustained a mortal injury yet we were preparing to have her endure more pain while we attempted to save her foal's life. I looked at her and she blinked her beautiful eyes ... quiet

acceptance of her fate.

By that afternoon we had her leg stabilized with a large splint that I had gotten from the veterinary hospital at UC Davis. While there, I spoke with a surgeon about the fracture, a reproductive specialist about the medication to hasten the foal's maturation and to the neonatal care folks about a surrogate dam. They all agreed our plan was reasonable. Marika was much more comfortable by the afternoon. She was eating and drinking, urinating and passing stool. So far things were OK. I instructed Robert on how and when to give the meds over the ensuing days, and what to look for in terms of the impending birth. Our plan was set. It had been a long day.

Four days later it rained nearly all night. I started out in the morning with a first year college student as a ride along. She was hoping to become a veterinarian someday. We were on our way to my first appointment when my office called and said the Johnson mare was down and in trouble. As we turned around and headed in their direction I began to go over the possibilities ... if Marika was down, she would not be able to get up. So the only choices were to induce delivery of the foal, which would take some time, or to anesthetize her and remove the foal by cesarian section. Outdoors, in the mud, an emergency C-section was not going to be pretty.

Marika was lying down on her left side, adjacent to the fence. She was not struggling nor was she in labor. There was however a small amount of wax on her teats, indicating that she was very close to foaling. I made my decision and gave her two injections to put her under a general anesthesia. She would feel no more pain, but I had to act quickly to get the foal out before it ran out of oxygen. After shouting instructions to Mrs. Johnson, (her husband had been called to the hospital earlier), a friend of hers and my ride along, I leaned over the mare's trunk and began to make an incision into her abdomen. Suddenly, my scalpel broke and the blade fell into the mud! With every second counting, I ran to my truck and got out my very sharp Buck knife!

I went back to the mare and thrust the knife into her abdomen and made a cut along her ribcage toward the flank. Her intestines spilled out onto the ground, slithering and steaming. I reached through the mass and felt for the uterus. I could feel a leg within the uterus and took hold and pulled up. I then cut into the uterus and grabbed a cannon bone, then another, and pulled the foal out. It was a huge black and white filly!

It was not breathing or moving. I swung it by the hind feet for a moment and laid it down. I felt for a pulse. Nothing. I massaged its' chest over the heart. I then covered its' nostrils with my mouth and blew into its' lungs. No pulse or movement. I massaged its' chest again and blew into its' nostrils. Nothing. I picked it up and swung again, laid her down and massaged and blew. It seemed like the minutes were piling up. I massaged again. Suddenly I felt a heartbeat! Then she coughed and spat! She sat up on her sternum and threw her legs out and wobbled there, blinking; as if to say, "*Where am I?*" I was elated! I began rubbing the sides of her chest with towels.

Then it hit me, Marika. She could wake up any second! I looked at the ride along.

She was standing on the other side of the pen, not moving, her mouth was wide open. She was holding the syringe I had given her earlier. I took the syringe and knelt beside the mares' neck. Tears spilled out of my eyes as I injected the solution that ended her life.

"I'm sorry," I whispered, still not sure if it was right to have prolonged her pain to save her foal.

I heard a whinny behind me and Mrs. Johnson said,

"Look, Pearl is trying to get up."

"Pearl?" I asked.

"Yes, we had decided if it was a filly, we'd call her Ocean Pearl."

"Well lets get Pearl to the university to meet her surrogate dam" I said. We loaded her into the back of the Johnson's suburban and she drove off with her friend cradling the filly.

I sewed up Marika's abdomen with baling twine. A light rain fell as I worked. It was a bittersweet ending. I went home and cleaned up and went to my next appointment. When I got there the client said,

" Morning Doc. How is your day so far?"

"Okay," I said, winking at my ride along.

That was three years ago. I vaccinated Pearl the other day. She looked great. She'll be going to the trainers in a month, although the Johnson kids have already been on her back.

My ride along for that day is now in her second year of vet school in Washington State. When she left to go up there I told her to remember Marika and Pearl, and to always have a plan ... even if it's a sharp knife in the truck. Now it's about 11pm and I'm lying on a cot outside our foaling stall. There is a very pregnant Quarter horse mare in the stall with honey-like wax seeping from her teats. She comes over to the door which is slightly ajar and sniffs

... "In spring the foals arrive" I say. She turns and walks over to the hay in the corner.

Jamie Kerr, DVM