Time to get ready for the breeding season

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The rain has come at last and the grass is finally growing, Time to sit back and relax and watch some footy, or is it?.....

No it's not, I'm afraid. Now it is just as important to keep thinking about what we are doing, or not doing, to look after our mares and do it better. For a start let's separate our mares into two groups – pregnant and not.

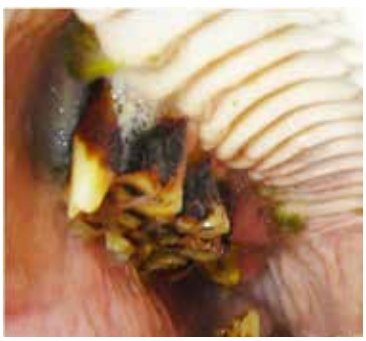
That is probably the first question – did we get all the mares checked at the end of the season to be sure who was in foal past the 45-day milestone? If not – it is worth the effort & cost to consider this sooner rather than later as pregnant mares should be fed the correct amount of a balanced diet to optimize foetal growth and development. It is not only costly to overfeed empty mares but may be detrimental if they are too fat going into the next season.

So what is the "correct amount and a balanced diet"? Unfortunately grass alone does not necessarily produce a healthy foal, and unless you are in the traditional dairy farm areas of the state, it is often an optional bonus of dubious quality. Being too dry for too much of the year on top of sandy or gravelly ground is not conducive to quality grass production. But if you are lucky enough to have grass – is it quality grass and does your soil contain all the trace elements and minerals necessary for good foal production? Who knows? The Department of Agriculture does! www.agric.wa.gov.au has stacks of online advice and consultants available to help you with soil analysis, pasture mixes and management plus land management for small and large properties – to name just a few. Get online or get on the phone and use this mine of information. Having said that – it takes time to fertilise the land and establish good pastures – this may be a long-term aim but to optimize foal health we generally still need to provide hard feed on top of any pasture available.

Next question. Should you feed a grain based diet + vitamin / mineral additive or a pelleted feed? All the good feed companies can provide you with diet balancing advice to suit the breed, age & pregnancy status of your mare(s). It is a good idea to compare the options vs cost vs convenience of various products to see what is right for your situation and your mares. Often pre-formulated / balanced pellet feeds are not as expensive as they appear when you consider the cost & effort of balancing a grain based diet with supplements. Also, older mares often require extra nutritional support provided by pelleted feeds as their teeth wear out. If this all sounds too hard and you are wondering if it is really necessary – is it worth waiting for 2 years to find out your new foal has a joint disease due to poor nutrition of the mare during gestation and lactation?

OK – what is next on our list to consider? In many areas of WA horses experience a high rate of sand colic - so how can we reduce the risks? If you are able to have good pasture cover for most of the year you are lucky and that is probably the best prevention. If not, as soon as the rain comes the mares are picking at the sweet young grass coming up through the loose soil and ingesting varying amounts of sand.

Dentistry is another maintenance tool that often slips under the radar when a horse is no longer ridden. Just in case you didn't know – ALL horses get sharp points on the sides of the cheek teeth which cause ulceration and pain slowing down their ability to eat and reducing the efficiency of grinding up food – especially grain and grass. Also, there is very good evidence that chronic gum disease results in bacteria getting into the blood stream and localizing in the placenta causing abortion. This becomes increasingly important with older mares as 60% of horses over 16 years of age have gum disease due to age related dental problems. Prevention is always better than cure and if a horse has had its teeth done regularly you can choose a dentist that uses hand or power-tools. But if your horse hasn't been treated for a few years there may be more serious issues requiring a more experienced dentist with powertools and there are issues with sedating mares in the last 3 months of pregnancy as the drugs cause clamping of the uterus – so don't leave it too late to think about.



Drenching with oil and salt mixtures is one method of reducing the sand load but this approach has a couple of important drawbacks to consider. Firstly – if your mare is a sand magnet you can drench her one week and she will still get sand colic the next because she just eats that much sand in a week &/or the drenching just can't get rid of it all. Also, mares in late gestation are more prone to large bowel displacements anyway and stirring things up with a big drench may be fine 90% of the time but "Murphy's Law" seems to apply to horse owners and is a risk in late pregnancy. Another option is to give a cup of psyllium daily mixed in the feed, once a day for 5 days once a month. Psyllium is like glue and grabs the sand removing that which has accumulated in the folds of the large bowel. If your horse doesn't like eating psyllium there are pelleted versions available through most feed suppliers. Don't feed it all the time as the balance of bacterial flora in the gut will change to favour those that can digest psyllium and then it can't remove the sand.

It is easy to let time go by and forget about feet when horses are not in work. The stress of lameness and pain can cause or contribute to foetal loss so keep them trimmed regularly and some mares may need to be shod if they have hoof issues.

Modern worm pastes are safe for pregnant mares and they should be treated for their own health as well as to reduce the risk of the young foals getting large burdens which reduce growth and in extreme cases can cause blockages and death. Talk to your vet about appropriate strategies for your property. In an ideal world, faecal egg counts and treating only those that have significant burdens helps to target treatments and reduces the risk of developing resistant worm populations.

Also, you need to think about what vaccinations are due. Up-to-date vaccination of the mare may prevent abortion due to Equine Herpes Virus - mares should be vaccinated at 5, 7, and 9 months of gestation. Vaccination also provides the foal with vital antibodies in the colostrum that may save it's life – for example tetanus boosters should be given 3-6 weeks before foaling; & mares may be vaccinated against Rotavirus at 8, 9 & 10 months of gestation to reduce the risk and severity of scouring in foals. Strangles may also cause serious disease in foals and may be reduced by vaccination. Discuss which vaccinations are appropriate for your situation with your veterinarian.

As mares get older some need more TLC to keep them in good condition. Provide shelter in bad weather and consider rugs for those that are struggling to maintain weight despite good feed, teeth and feet. Avoid having large groups of mares as there will always be someone at the bottom of the pecking order and these mares need to be identified and separated so they can eat without stress before they lose too much condition.

One should regularly check the mare for udder development and any vulval discharge. Sometimes one can get warning of an impending abortion by noting early udder development and/or a discharge from the vulva or in the tail hairs. Early treatment may save the foal. Also, as the mare gets more heavily in foal the weight of the uterus may pull the vulva and anus forwards increasing the risk of infection travelling up through the vagina. Such mares may look fine when empty but actually need a Caslick [stitching of the vulva] to keep them in foal. Mares with a history of aborting should be checked regularly by your vet as some may benefit from targeted antibiotic treatment and altrenogest [Regumate ®].

Finally – have a good hard look at the mares in September for size and udder development. Remember you have been feeding for two so, do they have that odd pregnancy shape to their abdomen + some udder growth or do they just look fat? If in doubt get them tested again as there is nothing worse than waiting for a late foal and then realizing she is just fat and you've missed half the breeding season.

OK – now lets look at our barren / dry mares. Avoid having them with your pregnant mares close to foaling as their curiosity about the new foal may conflict with a strong maternal instinct and it is usually the foal that gets injured in the crossfire. You also don't want to stress your pregnant mare by removing her BFF [best-friend-forever] and having her slip due to her running the fence for days with separation anxiety.

The same rules apply to feeding, feet, teeth, worm treatments and general TLC for the old or timid. You want them in tip-top condition.

But before we get into the next season the first question to ask is: are they worth breeding from looking at it from an economic viewpoint? All racing codes are under pressure from welfare organisations and indiscriminate breeding of horses that may not make it to the racetrack, or be commercially viable, doesn't help the industry or your wallet. It would be best for all to concentrate on quality not quantity. Breeding from mares that are unfashionable bred and have not performed well themselves on the racetrack is unlikely to produce a commercially viable foal, and this needs to be considered carefully before making a decision to send a mare to stud. There is life after racing for those that didn't cut the mustard to breed the next generation. Check out Racing & Wagering WA's Off the Track program which supports and encourages the re-training and re-homing of retired racehorses www.rwwa.com.au.

Then if she was bred last season and missed – can we work out why and improve her chances this year?

Maiden or timid mares sometimes take a while to find their place in a large mob of dominant mares. If at all possible keep groups small and look out for those being picked on at feed time. Waiting until you can see weight loss is too late – weighing mares regularly when they are scanned identifies such mares quickly so they can be put into smaller more friendly groups.

The same advice holds for feeding, hoof care and dentistry as discussed earlier.

Has she had many foals or a history of infections or a bad foaling? A full examination by your vet could give you valuable information to help with decisions on treatments early in the next season. For example – she may benefit from a Caslick; there may still be a persistent infection present in the uterus that needs treating and consideration as to why it hasn't cleared naturally in the off-season; a biopsy from inside the uterus will evaluate long-term damage to the glandular tissue responsible for feeding the young embryo and scar tissue that may inhibit placental development and result in abortion; there may be a large number of cysts in the uterus which may interfere with the recognition of pregnancy which could be removed before the next season.

Is she an older mare that may have Cushing's? Not all Cushing's horses are hairy – although when they are super-hairy & it isn't winter they are 99.9% likely to have this condition. Cushing's disease results in high levels of cortisone predisposing the mare to recurrent infections, laminitis and foetal loss. It is diagnosed by a single blood test and may be treated although treatment is for life.

OK – so all other factors have been sorted, what else can we do to prepare for the season? Although the Standardbred breeding season is better aligned to the natural breeding season of horses – some mares may still be slow to cycle at the beginning of the season. The use of artificial light to mimic the long-days of summer has long been used to improve early cycling rates in mares. Traditionally stud managers have utilised bright high intensity light using either; Option 1 = mare receives 16 hours of light and 8 hours of darkness from winter solstice or one month before; or Option 2 = one hour of bright light between 9.5 – 10.5 hours from sunset. Recent studies using a hood with a blue light shining in one eye overnight have given excellent results without the need for stabling.

Regular teasing of mares the month before breeding is planned not only helps to stimulate hormonal pathways in the mare but also identifies those that are cycling normally and those that should be scanned to see if there are other treatments available to optimize their breeding efficiency.

Look in upcoming Racing Ahead WA editions for more articles on foaling & the newborn foal to help you in creating your next Inter Dominion Champion. ■