



# Attending to the Newborn Foal

by **HEATHER SMITH THOMAS**

Usually mares give birth with no problems and the foal is strong and healthy, but it can pay to be there. If something does go wrong, a little help at the proper time can make the difference between life or death for the foal. A hard birth or premature separation of the placenta (part of the placenta coming through the birth canal ahead of the foal because it has detached too soon) can severely stress the foal. He may become short on oxygen during birth and will need resuscitation as soon as he is fully born.

Whether the birth was normal or difficult, make sure that the foal begins breathing as soon as he emerges. Gently take the sac away from his head if it has not already broken (and do it with speed if it is still intact and full of fluid!) and clear the mucus from his nostrils. The foal cannot go very long without oxygen. Oxygen deprivation can cause permanent damage. Even if a vet is en route, the crucial time for the foal to start breathing is right after birth, so it may be up to you to help him get going if he is slow.

Immediately after being born, most foals position themselves upright, thus enabling their lungs to expand properly. If a foal lies flat, he is not able to breathe as well—his lungs cannot fully fill. If he is tired from a hard birth, make sure he is upright. Some foals will show obvious signs of weakness and lack of oxygen (lying flat and unable to roll up onto their chests, or

limp and listless), while others may appear normal at first and then begin gasping for breath. These foals can usually be helped by vigorous rubbing with a towel to stimulate circulation, and also moving their legs while giving a body massage to increase heart and lung action.

If a foal is not breathing at all, clear the nasal passages with a suction bulb (if you have one) and give artificial respiration. As long as there is a heartbeat (and you can feel it with your hand on the lower left side of the ribcage—just behind and above the elbow) there is hope for the foal, that is if you don't let him go without oxygen too long.

A heartbeat is usually easy to feel in a foal because there is very little tissue between the heart and the outside chest wall. Heart rate can be an indication of respiratory distress, because it drops when the body tissues are depleted of oxygen. The normal rate should be between 30 and 90 beats in the first few minutes after birth, going up to between 60 and 200 in the first hour, then leveling off between 70 and 130 during the first 48 hours. If the heartbeat stays very low, the foal is usually in trouble. Once the tissues become less oxygen starved, then the heart rate will usually rise.

Even in a normal, easy birth, the foal should be closely monitored for the first few hours to make sure he is healthy and doing all right. Close attention to small details can often help make the difference in early detection of a problem.

After the birth, the mare and foal usually lie there a few moments. The foal will often be trying to stand before the mare does. The umbilical cord breaks when the mare gets up. The foal's navel stump should be dipped in tincture of iodine (seven percent solution) as soon as the cord breaks, to both help it dry quickly and seal off the entrance to prevent infection. The easiest way to apply the iodine is to completely immerse the navel stump in a small jar (a shot glass works well) of it, while it is being pressed up against the foal's abdomen and swished around, but be careful not to spill any of it on to the foal.

If the weather is cold, then dry the foal quickly with towels. The normal foal will try to get up soon after birth. Out in a pasture, though, the foal should have less problems getting to his feet and finding his coordination since footing is better and he is not encumbered by straw bedding. Also, he's not hindered by walls or the chance of banging against a manger. If he's in a stall, make sure the bedding is not too deep and there are no feed buckets and other obstacles for him to crash into during his wobbly efforts. Remove any objects that might cause injury during these first uncoordinated struggles, including screw eyes or nails at foal height. Put yourself at foal level when checking a foaling stall for hazards.

He will usually fall down several times before gaining his feet. It's tempting to help him, but usually

**Continued on next page**

## HORSE CARE Continued

unnecessary, and in some instances harmful. Sometimes a foal may have a fractured or cracked rib from the pressures of birth, which will heal fine under normal circumstances. But too much handling (trying to pick him up or help him stand) may displace the fractured ends and cause them to puncture a lung. Monitor his progress in finding the udder, and help him only if he really needs it. Too much help may interfere with bonding, especially if it's the mare's first foal.

### Crucial Colostrum

It is important that he nurse within the first two or three hours of birth, and get an adequate amount of colostrum in the first six hours, so as to get the most benefit from its antibodies. The foal's intestinal lining begins to thicken soon after birth, and he loses ability to absorb the large molecules—the antibodies can no longer slip through the gut lining into the lymph system and bloodstream. A foal that fails to nurse soon after birth gets

only a fraction of the antibody protection he needs.

The normal, healthy foal will have a strong desire to nurse and will keep trying until he accomplishes it. But he may need assistance, especially if the mare is uncooperative and won't stand still or even kicks at him. Someone may have to hold the mare (up against a fence or stall wall) while you guide the foal to the udder. If for some reason the foal is unable to nurse, he can be fed colostrum from a bottle or through a stomach tube if he is weak and unable to suck.

Colostrum not only provides antibodies against diseases, but also serves as a gut stimulant to help the foal pass his first bowel movements. These first evacuations are often firm and hard-packed and can be difficult to pass. Sometimes an enema is necessary to help the foal get rid of these hard pellets, but in most cases the laxative effect of colostrum will get things moving.

Some foals are slow to nurse due to foaling complications or because of some birth defect or impairment, but others are slow for no apparent reason.

In these instances, you may have to feed the foal with a bottle or by tube until he begins to nurse on his own. If he will nurse a bottle, that's the easiest way to get him fed if he cannot nurse his mother. But if he is weak and unable to suck, you may have to feed him with a syringe or a stomach tube. With most weak foals it is beneficial to syringe milk into the mouth, rather than use a tube, just to keep their swallow reflex going.

A stomach tube is generally used as a last resort, though some vets prefer to use it for any foal that has trouble sucking. This is a plastic tube that goes into the nostril to the back of the mouth and then down the esophagus into the stomach. The vet may put it in place and leave it, stitching it in place with a few strands of suture thread so it won't come out. Then you can milk out the mare periodically (with very clean hands and into a sterilized container), carefully funnelling the milk down the tube into the foal's stomach at specific intervals and in specified amounts. This method has some advantages over bottle feeding if

# HOLDING COURT

*Deputy Minister—Real Jenny, by Valid Appeal*



**Deputy Minister's son is expecting a 2003 crop of foals exceeding all previous crops in both quality and quantity. And, he is anticipating an even better book of mares this season.**

**Don't Be Left Out!**

**2003 Fee: \$2,000-Live Foal**

*Victory Rose Thoroughbreds*

5144 Allendale Road • Vacaville, CA. 95688  Inquiries to: Ellen Jackson • Phone/Fax (707) 678-6580

Web Site: [www.thoroughbredinfo.com/showcase/holdingcourt.htm](http://www.thoroughbredinfo.com/showcase/holdingcourt.htm)

the foal is weak. You can get the proper amount of milk into him without any effort on his part that might tire him, and without the danger of milk getting into his windpipe and possibly causing aspiration pneumonia. Also, the foal can still nurse the mare with the tube in place and, if you are not bottle feeding him, he won't think of you as his mother. He may still try to nurse the mare. Once he starts nursing enough on his own, the tube can then be removed.

#### **Bowel Movements**

During the first day of life, make sure the foal is passing bowel movements and

urinating. Sometimes a foal will be constipated and straining (and uncomfortable) even if you gave him an enema soon after birth. Some foals have a large number of hard, tightly packed pellets and will need several enemas to help get rid of them, until the colostrum works through. A cup or two of warm, slightly soapy water or mineral oil can be used, gently squirting it into the rectum with a big syringe or with a regular enema tube (put carefully just a few inches into the rectum) and squeeze bulb.

Some stubborn cases may require a small quantity of mineral oil or Milk of

Magnesia to be administered, which could soften up the high impaction that is out of reach of an enema. However, if the foal continues to have trouble passing bowel movements, or shows discomfort, then consult your vet.

Close attention to detail and being aware of how the foal is doing (perky and alert, bright and strong or uncomfortable, dull and weak) can help the horseman become aware of any small problems before they become serious. This allows for time to get veterinary help which could make a big difference in the future well-being of the foal.

## **Giving Artificial Respiration**

If a foal is weak or limp and lying flat at birth, take action to help him. If his airways are obstructed and you don't have a squeeze bulb to suction mucus and fluid from his nostrils, briefly position him with his head downward to help the fluid drain out, and then gently squeeze out fluid by pressing your thumb and forefinger along the top

of the nostrils toward the muzzle (like squeezing a toothpaste tube).

If he is not breathing at all, immediately resuscitate him after birth. With him lying on his side (head and neck extended), cover one nostril tightly with your hand while holding his mouth shut. Gently blow into the other nostril, but not forcefully or

rapidly as you may rupture a lung. Blow until you see the chest wall move and rise. Let the air come back out on its own. Then blow in another breath until the chest rises again to show that the lungs are filling. Continue with both filling the lungs and letting them empty, until the foal starts breathing on his own.

# **FLYING VICTOR**

**Flying Paster—Elegant Victress, by Sir Ivor**

Flying Victor begins 2003 with a bang!

**His 3-year-old filly ROMANTIC VICTORY wins the first race of 2003 at Golden Gate Fields.**

**First or second in over half of her 11 starts and never out of the purse money.**

2003 Fee: \$2,000-Live Foal



**BLOOMING HILLS**

21455 N. Clements Road • Clements, CA 95227 (209) 759-3315  
E-mail: [blooming@lodinet.com](mailto:blooming@lodinet.com) • Web Site: [www.bloominghills.com](http://www.bloominghills.com)  
Web Site: [www.thoroughbredinfo.com/showcase/flyingvictor.htm](http://www.thoroughbredinfo.com/showcase/flyingvictor.htm)  
Inquiries to Wm. H. Nichols, Syndicate and Booking Manager  
(916) 687-6331/Fax (916) 687-8249 • E-mail: [seaorbit@aol.com](mailto:seaorbit@aol.com)