

Breeding With Unusual Heat



Guest Forum

by HELEN AND RICHARD NIELSEN-ECKFIELD

In 1868, John Muir hiked across California's Central Valley toward the Sierra Nevada Mountains. He described in his journal the valley floor as a "lake of sunshine," and the mighty Sierra along its eastern boundary as "rising so gloriously colored in light it seemed not clothes in light, but wholly composed of it. . . a Range of Light."

What even a visionary like John Muir could not have imagined, however, was a glorious 400-acre Thoroughbred ranch, nestled on an island in the Kings River, which flows from the Sequoia portion of Muir's "range of light" just outside of what is now Sanger, California.

Establishing that vision was left to Ellwood M. "Buddy" Johnston, who began relocating the Ontario, California, Old English Rancho to this Sanger site in 1984. Today, Old English Rancho is home to more than 600 Thoroughbreds, who frolic, breed and train in the lush pastures watered by the Kings River.

One of the star-quality sires residing there, for whom work is a pleasure, is Unusual Heat, a Kentucky-bred son of the French champion miler Nureyev and whose mother was Danish-bred Rossard. Unusual Heat is considered one of California's top sires of Thoroughbreds who race on turf, dirt, and now synthetic surfaces.

Unusual Heat's co-owner Madeline Auerbach and Farm Manager Craig Allen arranged for us and our six-year-old granddaughter Mackenzie to stay at the farm for several days, so we could learn the intricacies of the breeding portion of the sport of Thoroughbred racing. Allen even cleaned and added fresh hay to a stall so we could stay in the barn with the horses so Mackenzie, who hopes to be a large animal veterinarian, could appreciate stable training firsthand. What fun.

Madeline and her partners, David Abrams and Russell Wolkoff retired Unusual Heat to stud in 1998. Since then, he has fathered an average of about 50 foals per year, many of whom have made it to the races.

"There are days at the Southern California tracks, when I do not have a horse I own running; however, there are at least half a dozen children of Unusual Heat in the meet," says Auerbach. "Sometimes there are as many as four running in the same race. Then I wonder which one I should root for but, in the end, I root for them all," she adds with a smile.

On Thursday, May 24, Unusual Heat sired three of the eight winners on the turf and new Cushion Track card at Hollywood Park: Spenditallbaby, Unusual Beauty and Sarah Jr. On another day, his offspring ran first, second and fourth in a single race.

Thoroughbred racing rules require these horses to be conceived through the normal sexual process, or "live cover" as it is called in the trade. No cloning or artificial insemination is allowed

With a gestation period averaging 11 months and a few days, and the objective of achieving birth as soon after Jan. 1 of each year as possible, Unusual Heat is expected to begin to perform two, sometimes three times per day soon after Feb. 1.

Numerically, covering an average of more than 60 mares each season is a performance schedule which would challenge even a Shakespearean actor. When you add the fact that it often takes as many as four separate attempts to achieve success, you have a performance schedule requiring a sire with incredible stamina, focus, and a high virility diet. Unusual Heat does lose significant weight each breeding season.

The focus of the farm breeding is the breeding shed, a special series of rooms in which the sire and mare can meet in an almost hospital-like setting. Allen and the team of veterinarian, assistant vets and handlers are all there to assist in what resembles a choreographed mating dance. There they apply antiseptic wash before and after, plus lubricants. "Cleanliness is a key," he says, "everything must be done to help insure success, and prevent any infection to either partner."

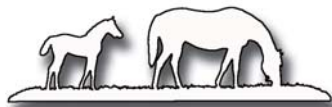
In preparation for the live cover event, ranch veterinarian Tamara Cohoon-Reist and her staff, one of whom has been with Old English Rancho for over 37 years, begin to perform ultrasound examinations of each mare's reproductive tract. They also take uterine cultures in December. As the mare's live cover date approaches, they attempt to pinpoint exactly when ovulation has taken place and the conception time is ripe.

Those familiar with the mares also carry out special field checks the morning of the live cover event to gauge their mood and willingness to participate. Everything is done to make this a pleasant event.

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Unusual Heat with his co-owner Madeline Auerbach and the Farm Manager of Old English Rancho, Craig Allen.



Guest Forum Cont'd.

For Unusual Heat, this is not just business as usual. Though born in Kentucky, he has truly become a California boy with a preference for blonds.

"You can tell by the sounds he makes and his body language that he is definitely excited by grays. Though he is a gentleman, and provides courteous service to all whom we bring in," says Allen, who serves as the impresario of the day's events. Live cover events involving the many sires at the farm usually take half an hour each, with as many as five to six separate events scheduled for the breeding shed each day between the first week of February and July 4.

Not all of the studs are as unusually gracious as Unusual Heat. Some have a history of being aggressive, biting the back of the mare's neck during mating. To protect her, the staff installs a leather jacket covering her shoulders and neck. Looking something like the leather outfits seen on motorcycle riders, it contains a row of little knobs which the sire can chew on if he needs to.

Every stallion is an individual, some with higher libidos than others, says Allen. Some sires need stimulation to perform, but not Unusual Heat. Old English Rancho owns a small group of brown and white paint mares who are used as surrogate mothers to nurse newborn foals in the event their mother dies during foaling. These painted nannies are sometimes called on to do double duty at breeding time, parading outside the window of the breeding barn to stimulate the sire inside to become ready for his conceptual task.

Ultrasounds track whether conception has taken place. If not, they try again. The window of ovulation is approximately three to five days. If the first attempt is unsuccessful, they may try again in the same cycle. If that is missed, there is another chance approximately 19 to 21 days later. Also at the end of the birth cycle, immediately after foaling, there may be another opportunity as mares develop what is called a "foal heat." Thus, depending on how easy the birth was, attempts for the next conception may happen as early as the week after the foaling from the previous year's live cover.

The farm is definitely a busy place at breeding time, and at birthing time, which overlap.

There are hospital-like equine birthing stalls equipped



Unusual Heat enjoying the completion of another breeding season at Old English Rancho in Sanger, California, on July 17, 2007.

with birthing assistance apparatus, even horse-muzzle shaped oxygen masks to assist struggling newborns to catch their first breath. Allen and Cohoon-Reist have dozens of stories of reaching arms-length inside the mare's womb to aid in the presentation by assisting both legs to come forward, or keeping the foals head from bending backwards or forwards. No matter how or when birth takes place, upside down, or backwards, the staff is always there to assist delivery and place the foal into positions which will stimulate the first flow of oxygen.

In the eventuality that a mother doesn't survive, the farm has developed an elaborate program of first nursing the foal with colostrums, then convincing one of the paint mares—with stimulation and hormone medication—that the newborn is hers. She then begins to lactate and adopts the orphaned foal.

While many mares are brought to Old English Rancho just for the live cover event, more than 200 foals remain on the ranch. Madeline and her partners keep 17 broodmares there and, last year, had 11 yearlings to sell.

These mares and weanlings, as well as the yearlings, are all checked daily. Like all children, they sometime catch colds. Our granddaughter Mackenzie accompanied Cohoon-Reist's assistant Erin Stillens one morning on her daily rounds, which begin at 4:30 am with the preparation of over 100 daily doses of vitamins. Each foal has a labeled syringe into which is loaded their unique vitamin prescription suspended in a molasses-like syrup. Then the Erin, and Mackenzie, drove and hiked the entire farm injecting the vitamin concoction into the foal's mouths. Done daily, the weanlings and yearlings love it and come running.

Debra Matheny, a registered health technician, under direction from the Cohoon-Reist, is responsible for the daily checking of the foals for wounds and respiratory problems, their bimonthly de-worming, plus their vaccination schedule.

Old English Rancho also has a complete training facility, including a practice track which sports the announcer's stand used in the movie "Seabiscuit." Here, each September, yearlings begin 30 to 40 days of getting started under tack, being ridden, having a daily bath and learning the basic manners associated with living in a stall. They spend the next year growing up with their friends in the pastures. Later, as two-year-olds, they remember their earlier schooling as they begin their foundation training.

Across the road, in his private fenced field, Unusual Heat enjoys a life of leisure from July through January. Then it's blazing saddles time again. We had to wonder what he thinks about during the six-month hiatus. But no matter what, come February he clearly will be up to the performance schedule set out for him.

The real joy of breeding, says Madeline "is following the Thoroughbreds from conception, through watching them grow and mature to the day they first get into the starting gate. That process is pretty amazing. It can be very gratifying, particularly when you consider all of the factors that could go wrong in the process." ■