



A FOAL'S Journey

by Pam Maley



IT IS THREE O'CLOCK ON A COLD KENTUCKY MORNING IN FEBRUARY.



The sound of the phone jars the farm manager out of a deep sleep; the night watch person is calling to say that the foal is coming. Dragging out of bed, the manager dons the warm coveralls that hang at the ready for just this purpose, and heads for the barn. The broodmare, experienced in these things, is still standing, but two tiny feet have made their way into the light. Soon she lies down, and under watchful eyes, gives birth to her foal. Once again, the observers have witnessed a miracle, and have had the privilege of hearing the mare give that very special soft nicker that she reserves for this night only, to welcome her foal. A beautiful colt with a regal pedigree has entered the world, and on his back will rest the livelihoods of hundreds of people, as he grows into his life's purpose.

'TIS THE FOALING SEASON

This scenario is played out over 25,000 times during this special time of year, in Lexington, Kentucky, and in central Florida, eastern Pennsylvania, southern California, upstate New York, Louisiana, and Ontario, Canada; as well as around the world, in Newmarket, England; Chantilly and Deauville in France; and Dubai in the United Arab Emirates.

It's breeding (and foaling) season for all Thoroughbreds, and everyone who bears responsibility for these horses hopes that the birth scenario goes as described. Sometimes it does not; the mare might be a 'maiden,' a first-year mother who requires a little more human intervention; and then, rarely, there are the gut-wrenching nightmare scenarios of compromised births or still-born foals.

The Thoroughbred breeding and racing industry is closely monitored under a tight set of rules administered by The Jockey Club, which came into being well over a century ago. In 1894, a group of eight 'patrons of the turf' met to create the rules, citing as their purpose "not only to encourage the development of the thoroughbred horse, but to establish racing on such a footing, that it may command the interests as well as the confidence and favorable opinion of the public."

...AND THE BREEDING SEASON

Because one of The Jockey Club's rules is that all Thoroughbreds celebrate their birthdays on January first, breeding season has a very circumscribed beginning and end. Horses are seasonal breeders, and Thoroughbred breedings are by live cover only, no artificial insemination, so the mare is transported to the stud farm to be bred to her owner's choice of stallions. The cost of a 'season,' which is defined as the right to breed one mare, is pricey, so the farm manager makes certain that the mare is ready to conceive before she is scheduled to be bred.

To that end, all mares are 'teased' every day until they are in foal, and this is done by walking a stallion, almost always a non-Thoroughbred, called 'the teaser' down the hall of the barn to look in on each mare in the hope that she will return his interest. Unfortunately, the poor, hapless guy never gets his reward during these short-lived courtships, but hope springs eternal. He is rewarded by being allowed to breed the 'nurse mares.' These are mares that function as wet nurses, in cases in which the mare, through infirmity, illness, or death, is unable to nurse the baby.



When a mare does show an interest in the teaser, she is put on the daily list for the vet to check. When the vet deems her ready, she is whisked off to the stallion, usually leaving behind a very worried baby who wonders if he/she will ever see mom again. A groom waits with the foal, reassuring where possible, and keeping an eye out. Within fifteen days of being bred, the vet can tell by ultrasound whether the mare is in foal. If not, the whole process repeats itself. The Jockey Club is always notified by the stud farm when a breeding takes place.

But time is short, so an unsuccessful breeding is an unwanted delay, because the gestation period for a horse is eleven months, and since all Thoroughbreds become a year older on January first, the challenge is to plan the breeding date so that the foal is born as close to January first as possible, without running the risk of it being born in December, in which case a days-old foal would become a yearling. May foals, for example, are thought to be at a disadvantage in the two- and three-year old races because they are less mature than January or February foals.

A SON IS BORN

But back to our newborn ... the farm manager and night person wait and watch until he gets up on shaky legs, usually with a few false starts, and the mare helps him learn to nurse - a fairly quick process, in normal circumstances. The next morning, the farm crew cleans up the mare, puts a halter bearing the mother's name on the baby, and moves mare and foal outside for a while, weather permitting, or to a clean stall. The vet will come on the first day to take a blood sample to be sure that he received the proper antibodies from his mother. As indicated, and ongoing, foals are handled, or 'imprinted' from day one.

By no later than summer, the colt is put into The Jockey Club registry, a process that used to be done on paper, but is now electronic. All white markings and their locations

are noted, as well as cowlicks; four photographs (one from each side, front, and back) clearly showing the markings are submitted; and a hair sample is taken, which is mailed to the lab for DNA testing. The DNA signature is recorded, the foal is assigned a registration number, and registration papers are then mailed to the farm, where they are treated like gold.

By August, our colt is weaned, and then allowed to grow and play until he becomes a yearling. At that point, his life will take one of two paths: he will be prepped and sold at a yearling sale, or, if his owner intends to race him, he will remain on the farm until he's ready to go to the trainer, when he's closer to two years old.

THE YEARLING SALE

Yearling prep is a real learning experience for our young colt. He

must learn to load quietly onto a van or trailer, how to 'show himself' to his best advantage when his handler brings him out for a buyer to see, and he must develop his muscles through exercise.

If his path takes him to the sale, and he's in Kentucky, he will go up for public auction at Keeneland, which hosts racing and sales, or to Fasig-Tipton, which is a sales company. In either case, our foal, now a yearling, will be assigned a stall on the sales grounds, and will have at least two days prior to the sale to be shown to prospective buyers.

For days, buyers, owners, agents, and trainers, go from barn to barn, catalogue in hand, looking at yearlings that interest them. If they want to see our yearling, the handlers, having bathed him that morning, will give him a quick brush,





remove the straw from his tail, and lead him out to one of the 'walking rings' that are between the barns.

On the day of the sale, he will walk up to the sales pavilion, in turn be handed to the sales handler, and will walk out to invite bids. At the fall of the hammer, he will have a new owner, who will put him in training to race.

OFF TO THE RACES

Some trainers will race them as two-year-olds, and nearly all will race them at three. That's the age for the classic Triple Crown races: The Kentucky Derby the first Saturday in May, the Preakness two weeks later, and the Belmont three weeks after that. But the road to those races is long, and only the best of the best get there.

There are claiming races, allowance races, and graded stakes (III, II, I) races, with the most talented horses pointed toward the Grade I races.

Claiming races are the lowest level; a price is set before taking entries, and any horse in the race can be 'claimed' (bought) at that price. This is done to level the playing field: a horse capable of running in a stakes race wouldn't enter a claiming race, because that horse is much more valuable than the set price. The next level are the allowance races, and then the graded stakes III, II, and I at the top.

At every step along the way, our colt has provided livelihoods for the people in his orbit, and has been well taken care of in return. There are the grooms, the farm owners and managers, the veterinarians, and blacksmiths. There are the satellite industries that sell tack, feed, hay and straw, mow the fields, bale the hay, maintain the farms and fences. There are the people who sell the grass seed, fertilizer, and farm machinery, as well as trucks, vans, and trailers. To name a few.

When he goes to the sale, there are commissions to be made by the consignor (seller), the agents, and the sales company; there are handlers, grooms, and night watch people; and there's the sale price that goes to the owner so that the industry continues to move forward.

Then comes the training phase, which supports the trainer and staff, the exercise rider, and eventually the jockey (and the jockey's agent), the race course, the wagering, and the purses won. And, if he's really good, and really lucky, he will take his place as a stallion, to live out his days on a beautiful farm, making more babies.

Quite a daunting task faces our cute, wobbly foal, as he goes through life with so many livelihoods depending upon him. But he's up to it; he is, after all, a Thoroughbred, the newest in a long line of proud racehorses.