

Ways to Save: Operate a More Efficient Breeding Program

By Carolin Von Rosenberg, DVM

Last year Consumer Reports published an article about how to lower your veterinary costs ("Tame your Pet Costs," August 2011) stating that one idea is for pet owners to price shop for veterinary care. Unfortunately, veterinary medicine doesn't really work that way, especially for horses. Veterinary medicine is far too complicated and diverse to price shop for individual procedures. Most horse owners agree that in the end, a long term and trusted relationship with your veterinarian is the most beneficial for you and your animals.

However, if you're a breeder, chances are you would be open to operating a more efficient program if at all possible, especially with the current lagging economy. Breeding and raising horses is expensive, and veterinary costs account for a large portion of that expense. Instead of haggling with your veterinarian about his or her fees, consider the points below to improve the efficiency of your entire breeding operation.

Evaluate Your Breeding Stock

The first and probably most difficult step in analyzing your breeding operation's efficiency is to evaluate your breeding stock. This does not necessarily mean that you have to get rid of your older favorite mares, but it does mean you might consider breeding to only some of your mares. There are two types of mares that I categorize as "non-breeders." One is the mare who produces foals that are not of sufficient quality or value, and the other is the mare who is hard to breed.

Do you have mares which may be easy to breed but are of low quality or produce low quality foals that are hard to sell? You can find these mares new homes, retire them, or delay breeding them until the economic environment improves. Lower priced foals cost just as much as the expensive ones to raise.

You may also want to reconsider breeding the older mare or the "problem breeder." I personally love the challenge of working with these mares, but I find that many owners are unaware of how much it may end up costing to get these mares pregnant. If the mare warrants it, find a good reproductive veterinarian and go for it. But if her offspring don't warrant it, or if your chances of a pregnancy and a healthy foal are low, consider taking her out of your program. If you review your bills



from last breeding season, how much did it really cost you to get her in foal? What are the chances she will have a live and healthy foal? What is that foal going to be worth?

Homework Prior to Breeding Season

If you have a mare you were unable to get pregnant the previous year, your first step should be to consult with your veterinarian. Two important questions to ask are: why did the pregnancy attempt fail last year, and can we expect to fix the problem?

One suggestion is to have "work-ups" done on your mares. Work-ups can be as simple as reviewing her breeding chart or as complex as doing an endoscopic exam on her uterus. I like to start with an ultrasound of the reproductive tract, a vaginal speculum exam, a uterine culture, and a cytology and biopsy. The biopsy is optional, but can be very helpful in determining if changes in her uterus are permanent or fixable. After gathering this information, along with a thorough reproductive history, I can usually formulate a plan and give my opinion regarding the chances of success as well as costs.

Another important aspect to consider during the off-season is the physical condition of the mare. Healthy, pain-free mares



Top: (left) Rosie (Freestyle x Equador) and her foal Gusto by UB40. (right) Priceless (Idocus x Wanroij) and her foal Guilder by Sir Sinclair. Photo by Bill Wertman and Inspo.com Above: A mare ready to foal at the Dr. Von Rosenberg's Buena Vista Farm. Photo courtesy Buena Vista Farm

"The two most common problems I encounter are poor teasing techniques and poor record keeping."

are much easier to breed than unhealthy, uncomfortable mares. How are her teeth? How is her weight? Is she sore somewhere? Is she being beaten up by her herd mates? How is your parasite control program? Consider chiropractic and acupuncture intervention if she has back and hip issues, since some conditions can interfere with the innervations to the reproductive tract.

The Farm Management

Once your breeding stock is in order, the next important step to consider is farm management. Remember, your veterinarian may only see your mares for a few hours each week. Take the time to properly educate your staff and yourself about the basics of breeding and managing broodmares. Check with your local universities—they may offer courses that cover breeding management. Your veterinarian will also probably be glad to take the time to review these basic procedures.

The two most common problems I encounter are poor teasing techniques and poor record keeping. Dr. Fred Benker of the Equine Medical Center of Ocala, Florida, says he is amazed at how many breeding farms do not use a teaser. "It's simple and easy to do. Teaser ponies or stallions are often available cheap or free, or alternatively you can give testosterone to one of your geldings," he suggests.

Once you have a teaser, it's just a matter of learning how to

tease your mares properly. You will be amazed at how much information you can provide your veterinarian by observing your mare's reactions and behavior, i.e., is she interested in the teaser, turning hindquarters towards him, squatting, raising her tail or winking? Sharing this information can save money in the long run because you'll be able to avoid unnecessary farm calls, palpations and missed cycles. Of course, while good teasing protocol will reduce your veterinary palpation costs tremendously, it is never a good idea to take your veterinarian out of the picture or forego palpations and ultrasounds entirely!

Good record keeping can also be invaluable. Teasing records and mare histories from previous years will be quite helpful to your veterinarian, making his or her farm calls more productive and successful.

Another great money saving tip: put your open (not pregnant) mares under lights, or breed only during the natural breeding season.

Putting mares under lights is easy to do. A 300-watt bulb per stall is generally needed. You want enough light to be able to read a newspaper, and you don't want any shadows. Bring your mares in by dusk, and leave the lights on until 11 p.m. Most mares which are put under lights in December will be cycling normally by mid-February.

Or you can wait until your mares begin to cycle normally. Dr. Michelle LeBlanc, theriogenologist at Rood and Riddle Equine Hospital in Lexington, Kentucky, says the first ovulation in mares in Florida, for example, is between April 15–20 on average. "If you do not want to put your mares under lights, start breeding no earlier than early April," she advises.

Remember, most mares will go through a transitional heat (which may be strong or prolonged, but probably will not be fertile) before they settle into a regular rhythm. Hormonal treatments such as Regumate or Prostin won't work at this point and are another waste of money. The occasional mare cycles normally throughout the whole year, but most do not. The breeding process will be more successful and less expensive if you wait until your mare has begun to cycle normally to start breeding, or you can choose to put your mare under lights.

The natural breeding season begins to decline in August—or earlier in especially hot climates where there is a dip in fertility when the weather gets too hot. For optimum efficiency, concentrate your breeding efforts from February to June for mares



Dr. Von Rosenberg ultrasounds a mare at her facility in Ocala, Florida.
Photo courtesy Buena Vista Farm

which were under lights, and from April to June for those which were not. The breeding season is shorter the farther north you are, and is slightly longer in the south.

Choosing a Stallion

Your stallion selection can easily affect your operation's efficiency. Besides the obvious attributes of the stallion himself, also consider the stallion's fertility, management, availability and stallion owner's reputation. Is he known to have good semen and a good record of pregnancies achieved from just one or two breeding attempts? Can you trust that his semen is being properly collected, prepared and shipped for optimal viability? And lastly, does he have a flexible collection schedule or a limited schedule which is going to make timing unnecessarily complicated (or impossible) on your end? Remember that a missed cycle means money down the drain.

You will also want to read your breeding contract carefully. How much is each shipment going to cost you? Does the contract include a live foal guarantee? If you choose to breed frozen, are you buying by the dose or by the straw?

Consider a Reproductive Center

The last factor to consider is whether or not you should send your mare to a veterinarian staffed breeding facility or clinic. Although this may seem counterintuitive as a cost cutting measure since you will be paying board in addition to your normal vet bills, for many smaller or less experienced breeding farms, this may be the best solution for breeding efficiency.

Some problems I commonly encounter in smaller or less experienced breeding operations include owners who don't have the time for the necessary vet visits, teasing and record keeping, owners who do not have a teaser and/or don't know how to tease their mares, and owners who do not have appropriate or safe facilities or experienced handlers.

If you opt to send your mare to an equine reproductive center, your mare will be handled and teased professionally and daily. Your veterinarian will be able to follow her as closely as needed. The office staff can coordinate phone calls for shipments of semen, paperwork, counter-to-counter airline shipments and courier services (if needed). If the mare has special reproductive needs, these can be handled in a timely manner. This option may seem more expensive up front, but should result in less work and frustration for the mare owner and the veterinarian, and it may increase your chances of success exponentially.

If you are considering taking your mare to an equine reproductive center, Dr. Phil Matthews of Peterson and Smith Equine Reproductive Center of Ocala, Florida, advises his clients to bring their mares in as early as possible in their cycles if they want to breed on that same cycle. "I would like to see her no later than fourteen days from her last ovulation, or if she's being




A Warmblood foal born at Buena Vista Farm.

Photo by PhotoArt By Jill

teased, no later than the first day of heat. If the mare arrives too late, it may be impossible to coordinate semen shipments in time, and you have to wait until the next cycle," he says. He reasons that allowing your vet to watch her through her entire cycle is more cost efficient than breeding her at the wrong time or missing a cycle entirely.



Most equine veterinarians are horse owners too and understand all too well the costs involved in breeding and raising horses. I think I can speak for most veterinarians when I say they like nothing better than for you to be efficient and successful in your breeding ventures. If you spend a little time fine-tuning your program, you should reap the financial benefits of utilizing your veterinarian's skills more effectively. 

About the author:

Dr. Von Rosenberg was born in Hamburg, Germany, but has lived in the United States since she was a teenager. She graduated from the North Carolina State University College of Veterinary Medicine in 1989 and has worked exclusively with horses since she moved to Ocala, Florida, in 1991. Her own practice at Buena Vista Farm focuses on equine reproduction and specializes in providing the smaller horse breeder with professional breeding management services. She can be reached by email at cavoro@aol.com.

