



Care and Management of the Young Foal¹

Thomas J. Lane²

INTRODUCTION

It is easy to assume that once a foal is a week old and healthy, mother nature and mother horse will take care of it until it is ready to be weaned. Nothing could be farther from the truth. The first few months of the foal's life is an excellent time to influence and train the foal for living in both human and equine society. A variety of management practices and techniques are available to aid the foal in developing to its maximum capability.

Halter breaking and leading can be very traumatic experiences if attempted when the foal is 5 or 6 months of age. Therefore, it is preferable to start such procedures when the foal is a week or two of age. Most breeders prefer to fit a soft leather halter to the foal a few days after birth. The first lessons are accomplished quite easily with a young foal and require a minimum of time and effort. Teaching a foal to lead, to have its feet handled and to be groomed is much easier when the foal is young. The effects of early positive experiences have been reported to influence later behavior.

In the first 12 months of the horse's life, the owner or manager has the opportunity to influence its behavior and ability to learn. Most trainers report that training is much easier and less traumatic for animals accustomed to handling at an early age.

FEEDING FOALS

When do foals start to eat? Most foals begin to eat with their mothers in the first few weeks of life. Some mares are nasty, however, and will not let their foals eat with them. Despite this fact, foals should not be given too many nutritional supplements. If the mare produces a lot of milk, the foal may be somewhat slower in starting to consume concentrate. When the mare's milk production is only moderate or low, the foal usually will commence eating with the mare at an early age. At this time, the foal should be allowed to eat what it wants. Most foals will begin to nibble some hay and grain on their own at 1 to 3 weeks of age.

At approximately 10 to 12 weeks of age, the growth rate and nutrient requirement of most foals will exceed the level of nutrients provided in the mare's milk. The best way to compensate for this difference is to supply the foal with nutrition in the form of creep feed. It is generally recommended that half to three-quarters of a pound of a high-quality concentrate be fed every day for each 100 pounds of foal body weight.

A creep feeder is a specially constructed enclosure that allows the foal to eat a specific diet while preventing the mare access to the feed. Once foals learn to enter the enclosure, they will routinely

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 2. Thomas J. Lane, Equine/Companion Animal Veterinarian, College of Veterinary Medicine, Cooperative Extension Service, Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences, University of Florida, Gainesville FL 32611.

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enter and eat the grain mix. The feeder should be kept clean and fresh feed given daily. The foals should be observed to ensure that overly aggressive foals are not preventing timid ones from eating. Foals that consume creep feed get accustomed to eating without their mothers and usually adjust to weaning much more satisfactorily.

Certain horsemen disagree on whether foals should be allowed to consume all the creep feed they desire. Owners and managers should be careful not to overfeed foals, since this can be detrimental to the foals' health and future athletic ability.

Many nutritional experts do not recommend the free-choice feeding of concentrates to foals because of the possibility of excessive consumption, which can cause enterotoxemia or potentiate the problem of epiphysitis. Enterotoxemia, caused by the excessive proliferation of clostridial bacteria in the small intestine, usually results in colic and death within several hours. Avoiding oversupplementation with vitamins and minerals is another precaution. An example of oversupplementation is the use of excessive iodine in feeds and supplements, which has been shown to cause goiter.

When mares and foals are in the pasture, the foals usually get plenty of exercise. This, of course, is the ideal way to raise foals. If special conditions exist, however, and the mare and foal must be kept in a stall or small pen, arrangements must be made for an exercise program. If such confinement is necessary, the foal should be given its own grain feeder.

WEANING

One of the most traumatic events in a foal's life is separation from the mare. Although a variety of methods are available for weaning foals from their mothers, there seems to be no consensus among experienced horsemen as to the best method. The best time or age for weaning foals also varies depending on the circumstances on each particular farm. Some equine behavior experts advise letting the foals stay with the mares as long as possible. For many farms and farm managers, however, this procedure is neither practical nor advisable. By the time foals are 4 or 5 months of age, most are leaving their mothers for periods of play with other foals in the field and to show their independence. Many foals now are weaned at a younger age than was once customary. It used to be common practice to wean

foals only after they were at least 6 months of age; many remained with the mares until 8 months of age.

Today, it is not uncommon for some foals to be weaned at 4 months of age or younger. If foals are accustomed to eating creep feed before weaning, many of the stresses associated with weaning can be overcome. It is very stressful for foals to have to learn to eat and be weaned at the same time. Most farm managers in the central Florida area prefer that foals be 5 months of age or older when weaned.

One very effective weaning procedure used with foals already trained to eat and lead involves removing the mares from the stall in the morning and taking them out of eyesight and earshot of the foals. The foals are kept in the stall on the first day and then put in a familiar pasture on the second day. Usually, it is recommended that the foals be turned out in pairs and allowed to settle down before adding other foals to the field. Another management procedure that may facilitate weaning and reduce stress is weaning foals in a place where the mares can see and hear them. This is accomplished by placing two foals in a small pen and putting the mares in an adjacent area separated by a safe fence. This procedure allows the mares and foals to see and call to each other and stops the act of nursing. In a few days, the foals become disinterested in the mares, especially if they have been eating creep feed well before separation. Generally, the mares and foals can be separated in several days without placing undue stress on either group. These are only two of the many ways that weaning can be accomplished.

The real key to any weaning management program is training the foals to eat well before weaning is initiated. The stress of separation can be overcome; however, if that stress is combined with a lack of nutrition, the foal's health and growth will be compromised. The younger the foal is at weaning, the greater the attention that must be given to diet and nutrient intake. Complete feeds are frequently utilized as creep feeds for growing foals. These feeds usually are in the form of pellets or mixtures of grain and chopped hay. Foals also should eat some long-stemmed hay, even when consuming complete feeds.

The weanling is more susceptible to nutritional problems than older horses. The National Research Council recommends that creep feeds contain at least 16 percent protein with 0.8 percent calcium and 0.6 percent phosphorus. The importance of a balanced

ration cannot be overemphasized. When foals' diets are deficient in essential minerals and vitamins during periods of rapid growth, the potential for skeletal problems is increased.

CARE OF THE MARE

The mare also must be watched and changes in the feeding schedule made to encourage the drying off process. One of the easiest methods of doing this includes decreasing grain intake and providing plenty of exercise for the mare. Most mares calm down in a few days and are not quite as susceptible to the several stresses of separation experienced by foals. Sometimes it is beneficial to feed the mare a hay of only moderate quality, especially if she is a heavy milker and the pastures are lush. The mare's udder should be checked daily. Some fullness is to be expected; however, excessive swelling of the udder, accompanied by heat and pain, may indicate infection (mastitis). In these instances, it may be necessary to do some hand milking to reduce pressure and to start antibiotic therapy. Under the usual circumstances, it is not advisable to hand milk the mare, since this only promotes the production of milk. In general, the nearer the mare is to the sixth month of lactation, the easier she will be to dry off.

FOAL FEEDING MANAGEMENT

As soon as the foals have adjusted to the separation from the mares, they may be moved to paddocks or pastures to socialize with each other. Such areas should not be large enough to allow the foals to run and injure themselves. Smaller areas will enable them to adjust to an environment without the mares. During this post-weaning period, it is extremely important that a balanced, high-quality ration be fed and that a good hay be available, even with adequate pasture conditions. Ideally, individual grain feeders should be available for each foal and the animals kept in small groups in the paddocks. On some farms, however, this procedure is not practical and the foals are fed in group troughs. In these situations, it is important that the foals be compatible and that plenty of feeding space be provided so that all foals can eat comfortably at the same time.

FOAL HEALTH MANAGEMENT

Another important part of equine management is controlling diseases and parasites to allow maximum development of the foal. It is the responsibility of each owner or farm manager and veterinarian to

design the most appropriate vaccination and parasite control program for a particular farm or situation. Most vaccine manufacturers recommend initial vaccination at 3 months of age, followed by appropriate booster vaccinations. In certain situations, however, the veterinarian may deem it advisable to vaccinate some foals at an earlier age. All foals should be immunized against tetanus and equine encephalomyelitis. In some farm situations, it may be important to immunize foals for strangles, rhinopneumonitis and equine influenza. Routine deworming programs should be initiated for foals no older than 60 days of age; in some instances, it may be preferable to deworm even at 45 or 30 days of age. On many well-managed farms, routine anthelmintic administration is carried out every 30 to 60 days. Periodic fecal analysis will aid veterinarians and farm managers in designing and assessing the effectiveness of parasite control programs. Foals fed individually can be given a continuous dewormer with their daily feed as soon as they are readily consuming adequate concentrate. This procedure is not quite as practical in group feeding situations.

CONCLUSION

The important point to remember about weaning is that it is a very stressful time for foals. Anything that can be done to reduce stress will benefit these young animals. Therefore, all vaccination, deworming and halter breaking procedures should be accomplished long before weaning is attempted.

It also is highly recommended that young foals be handled and taught to lead long before weaning is begun. A significant part of any young horse's training is related to the experiences it has early in life. The easiest time to handle and train a young foal is before it is weaned from the mare.

It is important for every horse owner and manager to realize that the foal's experiences are lasting. While this is especially true for positive experiences, it also applies to undesirable ones. The more positive a foal's experiences before and immediately after weaning, the easier it will be to handle and train that individual as a yearling and two-year-old.