

## Reluctant Mothers

Nature has a special place in her heart for Mothers – for without good mothers a species has no future. In a nutshell, the mark of a good mother is that she protects and nourishes her newborn.

But, alas, as is the case in any biological system, catastrophes occur. One such phenomenon in the horse world is commonly referred as Foal Rejection.

One of the most violent cases that we have seen involved a thoroughbred mare that foaled in a foaling stall with a monitor without any interference from humans. The mare foaled naturally but seemed to be terrified by the pain of birthing.

After the delivery she looked at the new arrival as if someone had placed a Tasmanian Devil in her stall. She began by pawing and stomping at the little devil that had suddenly invaded her space. Then she picked it up in her teeth and slung it around, trying to throw it out of the stall.

This degree of rage at a newborn is rare but milder forms are more common especially in first foal mares. Many folks think that a mare has to experience a difficult birth for this behavior to happen. We have not found that to be true.

We have seen many maiden mares have normal deliveries, only to ignore their foals. They don't attack them but they get up and walk away leaving their newborns helpless.

An even more common reaction is for a maiden to clean up her foal, and protect it but refuse to let it nurse. There seems to be at least two reasons for this type of behavior.

The maiden is so concerned with protecting the foal that she is unable to let it move down her hip. Every time the foal tries to nurse, she wheels around to keep it in front of her.

The other case seems to involve a tender udder. These maidens let the foal approach their hip but as soon as the foal attempts to suckle, they move off.

The solution to both these situations is easy – halter the mare, back her into a corner and encourage her to let the foal nurse. Most of the time, after the foal nurses a time or two, the new

mother understands and Nature gets back on track.

To reduce the chances of foal rejection, we recommend folks do not interfere with the mare during foaling or immediately after birthing unless it is absolutely necessary. This is the time Nature designed for the bonding of the Mother and the Child.

Distractions such as bright lights and loud noises may frighten the naive parent and interfere with the millions of years of selection for parenting genes.

Late one night we were monitoring a very nervous maiden mare during the last stages of labor when a group of rowdy college students decided to stop by the equine maternity ward.

Laughing and joking around and turning on the bright overhead lights, they scared the already fractious mare.

Immediately after delivering the baby, she jumped up and began running side to side bouncing off the stall walls – totally oblivious to the presence of her new born.

In many of the milder forms of foal rejections “quiet and time” allows for latent mothering instincts to kick in. If pain and fear seem to interfere to the detriment of the new born, you may have to intervene with restraint on the mare or a mild analgesic to take some of the trauma out of her new situation.

In some cases, human aid may be a fleeting occurrence. In other cases, it may be necessary to nurse for several days. Whichever the case, provide the necessary help but phase out of the picture as soon as possible. Ninety percent of the mares can raise a foal better than you can.

For those rare individuals who will not step into the shoes of motherhood, be careful that they do not continue to reject their foals in subsequent deliveries. With these mares it might be good to find them another vocation or find a motherly surrogate to raise their babies.

— Dr. Jim and Lynda McCall

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