

BREEDING FOR PERFORMANCE

SEMINAR AT ROYAL AGRICULTURAL UNIVERSITY, CIRENCESTER, MARCH 2014

Words and photos by Anne Brown

ANOTHER USEFUL EQUINE REPRODUCTION seminar attracted a full house of breeders at the Royal Agricultural University, Cirencester, in March.

It was organized by West Kington Stud, the Beaufort Embryo Transfer Centre, B&W Vets and Saracen Horse Feeds with a daytime session for vets and research scientists, and an evening session for breeders.

The day session brought vets up to speed on the latest developments with lectures by world experts Tom Stout from the Utrecht Faculty of Veterinary Science, who spoke on overcoming infertility; Sarah Stoneham, a specialist in neonatal gastro-intestinal disease; James Crabtree who explained the advances in Doppler ultrasound in mares; and Newmarket veteran Nick Wingfield Digby, who covered growth defects in foals.

Needless to say, most of this went over my head, but it is reassuring to know just how much research is going into equine reproduction, driven mainly by the racing industry and high-priced Warmblood performance horse breeding.

Research seems to show that small herd size and small paddock size is best for young foals, enabling them enough - but not too much - exercise. And thankfully, the vets advised giving foals time to self-correct imbalances in the legs or feet.

In order for mares to conceive early foals, light was stressed as vital for mares to produce the hormones needed to ovulate early in the year, with stable lamps recommended so mares had no more than eight hours of darkness. Encouragingly, the vets were optimistic about the chances of most healthy mares ability to produce healthy foals. However, infertility and complications increase as mares get older, due often to the presence of cysts in the womb which can prevent implantation of the fertilized egg.

Results from artificial insemination (AI) continue to improve, both from fresh or chilled semen and from frozen semen, with embryo transfer an increasingly-used option for sport horse mares in their prime whose owners do not want to take them out of competition for maternal duties.

The most valuable revelation was a product which induces lactation in mares, called domperidone! While it does not produce the vital colostrum which every foal needs at



AHS out in force - Fiona Leng, Finn Guinness, Natalie Aggiss, Caroline Sussex and Judy Phillips

birth to give it protection against infection, the mare will produce milk if a foal suckles. The vet gives the compound for six or seven days to a non-maiden mare, plus a quadruple dose of prostaglandin which can be pretty gruesome for the mare as she simulates birth pains and can sweat up dramatically. Nevertheless, this could end the heartache of foals dying because their dam dies or

refuses to allow them to suckle, as long as another mare is available to take over.

The other surprise was Sarah Stoneham's identification of gastric problems in foals under two weeks old, which need a completely different treatment to that for older foals.

We've all seen foals scouring when their dams have their foal heat - Sarah was talking about diarrhea ten times worse than this,



Vets and AI specialists Chris Shepherd, Martin Boyle and Tessa Clarke with seminar co-organiser Nikki McGee (2nd left)



The evening speakers; (from l to r) Richard Botterill, Jan Rogers of BEF, Lizzie Drury, Jo Dixon and Tom Stout

where the foal loses so much fluid it is in danger of organ damage and protein leakage. Intra-venous drugs and antibiotics, even an enema as soon as possible, are Sarah's most frequent solutions, and separation from mare's milk in some cases. However, care must be taken with electrolytes as new-borns don't handle them in the way older foals do. The traditional Pepto Bismol is often not the adequate answer for very young foals.

Debbie Nash, the instigator of the equine reproduction symposium run every other year, explained her most recent work on MIE (mating-induced endometritis). This is often caused by bacterial contamination, or the stallion's sperm, and creates an influx of fluid which can prevent the implantation of the egg.

Evening session

The evening session started with wise words from Jo Dixon, a Futurity Evaluator with the British Equestrian Federation (BEF): "A functioning uterus does not equal a good brood mare."

Jo then explained the value of putting youngsters through the BEF Grading system.

"It is a quality assurance of equine athletes," she stressed, "and provides information

for breeders who consider using particular stallions."

The highest Grade – Elite – is achieved by only 7% of young horses forward, but a Higher First or First Premium should be attainable for those correctly presented at one of the Grading Centres around the country in mid-summer. The vetting counts for 29% of the marks and the movement and judges' assessment 71%. Temperament is not calculated and the judges no longer know the pedigree of the youngsters in front of them. Vitally, Jo confirmed that in the Endurance section, sires did not require to be Graded, which allows much more flexibility for breeding our long distance Arab athletes.

Lizzie Drury, from Saracen Feeds, outlined the work the company has been doing with Kentucky Equine Research in the USA. They concentrate on the high energy and high protein mixes containing amino acids needed by weanlings and growing youngsters. She advises starting specialised rations before foals are weaned to help them through this stressful time.

"They need 1% to 1.5% of their body weight of feed every day," explained Lizzie. She recommends high energy forage with oats, cereal, super fibres, beet pulp, soya oil and rice bran. "If they get pot-bellied, reduce the

forage and increase the concentrates," she advises. "Foals should not carry fat – you should be able to see their rib-cage."

While Richard Botterill, an auctioneer with Brightwells, had sound advice on marketing young horses, it was out of the league of most of us. The company handles sales in the tens of thousand per horse – it can cost £1,500 just to put one Warmblood performance horse through an auction. They require them to be trained, athletic and fit. "If the horse is ridden, it's better to have a professional in the saddle for the best price," advises Richard. Thankfully, he offered alternatives, including using all the latest social networking opportunities, Youtube, Twitter and Facebook, as well as a smart, up-to-date, informative website of your own.

"Group together for cost-effective advertising; approach potential buyers at events and competitions, and be prepared to sell second-rate horses at a loss," he suggests. As most horses are sold to amateurs, he believes that temperament, soundness and quality are the traits buyers are looking for, and while there has been a huge down-turn in the number of horses bred in recent years, this can work in the favour of breeders still producing quality stock – "like Crabbets," I wanted to shout... ■