



Down on the Farm

by HEATHER SMITH THOMAS

A successful breeding program depends on being able to accurately predict when a mare is in heat and likely to conceive. Mares may vary in estrus behavior, and some don't show obvious signs of heat, so most breeders use a teaser stallion to help determine a mare's status. Breeders have various methods of checking the mares.

Bill Tracy, owner of JEH Stallion Station (Texas, New Mexico and Oklahoma), uses a teaser stallion he's owned for a long time. "He's very easy to get along with, so I walk him along the 12-foot wide alleyways between the paddocks. I usually have a helper (most often it's my wife) and they have the chart and I'll take the horse. We go up and down in-between the paddocks, and maybe stop and let the stallion eat grass in there. Some mares will come immediately and be belligerent and want to run him off, and others will come up and want to play—showing their receptiveness. A more timid mare might stand off by herself and show heat, away from the stallion. That's why it's important to have an observer with you. One person can't see everything, and if you are not watching the stallion you'll end up with trouble," he says.

"Some mares are so bossy that they'll run the other mares away, even if another mare is wanting to come up to the stallion. The bossy mare might not be in heat but she runs the others off. You might have to come back several times to really know what's going on; it pays to be persistent, rather than just walking down there once and deciding nothing's showing," says Tracy.

"When we have our mares under lights (inside under



Teasing Mares

lights with timers to turn them on in the evening for awhile and again in the early morning), I bring the stallion down through the barn after the mares have eaten and tease at each stall. That's a bit harder because it's a little more confined, but if you have an observer while you are letting him tease a mare, that person can also be watching the mares in the other stalls. A timid mare might back away from the stallion, but might show heat when he's not right at her stall." You have to be observant, and persistent.

When teasing along a pasture fence, the fence must be safe and secure. "Some mares will run up and kick at the stallion, and might kick through the fence. More typically, they'll strike at him, and might get a foot caught. A good teasing area is very important. Most farms have a solid fence where they tease mares. Sometimes they use a teasing chute, where they bring the mare to the stallion," he says.

Teasing with the foals present can be a tough situation. "What some places do, and we are also set up to do this (though we don't very often) is use a stud pen that's a small pen within a pen. It's a six-foot high pipe fence, within a larger fenced area. Our stud pen is a quarter acre, within an acre pen. So I can turn mares in there, next to him. Where I first saw this type of set-up was at Texas A&M; in their horse reproduction course they had a teasing area like that, where someone would get up on the corner of the fence and sit there to observe, with a chart, writing down which mare came over and did what." It's crucial to have some kind of identification on the mares, so that anyone on the farm (even someone who's not very familiar with the mares) can properly identify them.

"Sometimes the mares don't show to the stallion when you are teasing them, but a little later someone will be out feeding hay and see two mares chewing on each other and one of them is showing heat. So it helps if the mare can be identified—so anyone can tell you what number she was," says Tracy.

"On our mares who have foaled, we can kind of estimate when they will start to show. Most of the Thoroughbred mares we aren't going to breed at foal heat anyway (we'll wait till 30 days), but we do breed some of the Quarter Horses at foal heat because we AI (artificial insemination) them. We have a little more leeway on them, because we know a mare isn't going to get bruised immediately again by natural service. We have our teaser horse in his own stall in the barn—so when we are bringing foaled mares in and out we can walk them by his stall. That's a little easier. If you are taking a mare by him at four to six days post-foaling you know that she probably won't be in heat, and if she is in heat a breeding that early won't work anyway. But if a mare gets

out to 10 or 11 days and she starts to show, if you are going to try foal heat breeding it's time to do it," he says.

"Some people leave a teaser stallion in a pen next to the mare paddock, so mares can come up to him whenever they wish. But I prefer being able to observe the mares in a controlled situation. I've found that when the mares and stallion are real familiar with one another (constant contact) the mares may not show as much; it's not a big deal." The teasing situation works best if it's a little more of a novelty for the mares to have the stallion come by; a mare is more apt to come see him and say, "Hey, I've been looking for you!"

"The stallion I use as a teaser is one that in earlier years (when I had my own place), I turned him out with mares, to pasture breed. In those years, I never saw him breed a

mare, but had one hundred percent conception rate. I'd hear him out there at eleven o'clock at night romancing a mare, but never saw him breed a mare in the daytime. He'd loaf around, and lie down with the foals. If there were ten mares out there, it would be him and ten foals lying there under a tree. He'd get up to go to water and his whole group of foals would get up and go with him. He'd almost totally ignore the mares, because he already knew what was going on," says Tracy.

Because of the pasture breeding experience, and breeding mares as nature intended, this particular teaser is very savvy. "If he's really interested in a certain mare when we check the mares, you'd better go back and tease her some more, because he knows, even if she's not showing," he says. 🐾

Tricky Teaser

Every horseman has a few anecdotes to tell about unusual horses or a horse who did something unusual or humorous. Bill Tracy tells about an Appaloosa stallion he used for teasing, years ago. "A man sent a maiden mare to me, and she wouldn't have anything to do with the regular teasing stallion. This Appaloosa stallion was in the barn, so I just tied the mare outside his stall in the alleyway, and we were in the barn watching her. The stallion was having a fit, belling and hollering and the mare would just look the other way. So all at once he darts down and grabs a big mouthful of alfalfa hay, and went to the corner where she was tied—where there was a little feed door with one less bar. He jammed his face out there with

the alfalfa in his mouth and just stood there, and never made a sound."

The mare came over to him, finally, and started nibbling the alfalfa he'd offered her. And whenever she nibbled at his mouthful of hay, he'd make a low, quiet nickering, chuckling sound, sweet-talking her. "He went back and got three more mouthfuls after she ate the first one he offered. Four mouthfuls later, she broke down and showed she was in heat, and we were able to breed her immediately after. That was the most unusual courtship I'd ever seen. If loud noises won't work, bring flowers! That horse quit belling and was as quiet as can be, and it worked," says Tracy. 🐾

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