

Horse whisperer and midwife

Avon farm specializes in bringing newborn foals into the world

By Laurie Mercer

The radio transmitter had already signaled that the pregnant mare was lying down. Closed circuit video cameras in the stall at Carlland Stables in Avon displayed the activity in the house just a few yards away, but Sue Carlson was already with her mare.

With a sweaty flank and lots of heavy breathing, the mare delivered what looked like a large transparent sack with two tiny pointed feet on either side of a bony head. When the mare doesn't tear open the embryonic sack, her human helper Sue is quick to assist.

Nostrils flare, ears twitch, and life begins. In the wild, the foal would be at its most vulnerable right now. Nuzzled and licked by the mare, within minutes the still wet youngster—a colt with an unusual-shaped shooting star pattern on his forehead—will be gathering energy while awkwardly attempting to get onto his feet.

The first human contact is almost immediate. Sue is cajoling him, laughing a little, and harnessing all the positive energy in a barn full of welcoming nickering. While the mare had been waiting eleven months for the foal to arrive, Sue's entire life has been her preparation for this event. With curly hair, bright blue eyes, and lots of freckles, she says her boarding operation is a 24/7 assignment where vacations are rare.

Approximately eighty foals—all owned by other people—will get their start at Carlland Stables this spring. Many are destined for the race track; stakes winners have been born here. It took Sue only a minute to see that things were not quite right with the new baby. There are probably few veterinarians in the Genesee Valley who have delivered as many foals as Sue. If intervention is necessary, she knows how to help.

A thoroughbred foal weighs about 120 pounds at birth. Most of its long, lanky body is made up of legs. Sue was concerned that the front feet of this big-boned colt appeared to be contracted. She quickly applied splints to the still-soft bones, and a tiny quilted coat to maintain his body heat. In ideal circumstances, a foal gets to its feet and nurses in about forty-five minutes.

Without that strength, Sue took to milking the patient mare as if she were a cow, and began bottle-feeding the baby, who nestled quite comfortably in her lap unaware that this person was his midwife and not a second mom. Within a few hours, the colt with splints was up and nursing on his own.

In the distance at the 160-acre farm, striped with its miles of three-board fencing, were the racetrack horses enjoying a "layup"—down time before the tracks open again. There are



This newborn foal was born at Carlland Stables in Avon, which specializes in maternity care.

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also youngsters not yet broken, as well as some pleasure horses. Carlland Stables, which uses an additional 100 acres and dozens more stalls on a neighboring farm, just celebrated its tenth year in business.

While some mares and foals are loaded up on a trailer shortly after delivery to return home, many stay on. Sue calls all of her boarders of any age “my babies,” and many are return guests.

The level of care for each animal makes it a kind of well-regarded horse spa. There are many barn cats about and chatty helpers who muck stalls, carry water, toss hay and straw, and lead the parade of animals outdoors every morning and back in before dark. The barns can be very busy and then very quiet with only the soft sounds of horses contentedly chewing their feed.

Throughout March, a mare will foal an average of one every three days, and as many as four have been born almost at once. By April, most births are complete and many thoroughbred mares, with foals, will go off to be bred again. By then the sun is stronger, the grass fresh, and there are other youngsters in the paddocks, who unlike their patient mothers, are in the mood for some fast-moving horseplay.

Watching a week-old baby horse level out on his spindly legs in his own version

of a gallop is thrilling, even to a non-horse person. There are few young animals that hold as much untold promise as a horse. It has been suggested that horses are a part of wish fulfillment. Our relationship with horses changed the course of history, especially in war, when effective horsemanship was a matter of life and death.

Sue had bought her first horse, a Tennessee Walker, for \$100 when she was a horse-crazy youngster living in Jamestown. Her interests grew to include breeding as well as riding, showing, and driving carriages with Morgans, Gaited Horses, and Standardbreds. When she went off to college in Ohio to study science, she had to give away her childhood horse, an emotional parting she still mourns. She regularly visited her trusted friend, who lived to be thirty-seven years old.

It may have been serendipity—and certainly daring—that had led Sue, who once worked in research at the University of Rochester, and her husband, Greg, who once worked for Kodak, to buy a farm that was way too big for their needs. Around the time they closed on the property in Avon, both were let go in downsizing operations.

The Carlsons’ plan to take in boarders mushroomed. Greg, now self-employed, develops sophisticated networking solutions

for large companies. The couple has two sons—one working at Xerox and the other at Cornell.

It’s said when you close one door another one will open. In this instance, that new door was to a stall where yet another pregnant mare indicated it was time to give birth. Mares are notoriously secretive about such events—probably a holdover from surviving in the wild. Thanks to her schedule, Sue gave up the idea of uninterrupted sleep many years ago. Sometimes she is so busy and involved that her pajamas stay under her barn clothes long after lunch.

As much as she loves her horses, she watches them relentlessly with a critical eye for their health, condition, and well-being.

Horses are major labor-intensive investments when measuring emotion, finances, and time. Sue understands that a successful foaling is the just the auspicious beginning to a hopefully long and eventful path in life. ^(SBS)

Laurie Mercer began writing features for Upstate magazine. She has been around horses all of her life. Co-author of Opportunity Knocks—Using PR, she also has an ebook for children, Siegfried the Weird White Peacock from Barnes & Noble.