

Fostering a Freeloader

by Wanda Pooley

Careful selection of the right sire can take years. Next comes the actually mating. Then, knowing the peculiarities of the equine's reproductive system, hoping and waiting for that embryo to change to a fully acknowledged fetus can fill more anxious weeks.

Now the time was at hand, Cotton, an Appaloosa mare for whom I shared the earth, moon, and stars, was about to give birth.

"Mac, come quick!" I proclaimed from across the lot as Cotton began to circle and paw the ground, "I think she's in labor."

We stood there watching the slow progress of a new life trying to gain entrance in to this world. Cotton laid down, stood up, pawed some more, and laid down again. Soft grunts followed her progression. Time went on, but no little feet protruded. More grunts, now stronger, filled the air as Cotton continued her instinctive duty to deliver this foal.

"I'm calling the vet. This is taking too long." I declared to Mac. Back at the house, I dial the number of the clinic. Since it was after hours, I had to wait until the answering service responded. Leaving a message for the vet, I returned to the grassy lot.

"Anything yet?" I quizzed Mac.

"No, she just keeps getting up, stretches out some, then plops back down." he reported. "How long is this supposed to take, anyway?"

"Horses don't have long labor. I read that if nothing productive happens in an hour, the mare may be in trouble." I answered.

Just then the outside bell clanged. Our system for letting us know the phone was ringing. I bolted back down the driveway. Out of breath, I reached the phone and gasped, "Hello, [puff puff puff] Oh, hi Doc. [puff puff] Listen, Cotton is in labor and so far, nothing."

On the other end of the line the vet quizzed, "What's she doing? Can you see any sign of feet sticking out? Has she dumped her water?"

"No, nothing like that at all and I'm worried she might be in trouble." I whimpered.

"Well, don't worry too much. These things take time. You're probably just over anxious. She'll have that foal in due time," he reassured.

I wasn't as convinced about this as the vet. The reality was that his associate was the better horse vet, but bad luck of the draw had this vet on call instead. Returning to the drama in the paddock, I could see Cotton still was having no luck getting her foal born.

"What did the vet say," asked my husband.

"He said these things take time," was my glum response. "You know, if nothing happens soon, I'm calling Dr. Tom. He's the better vet anyway and has spent enough time getting Cotton through this pregnancy."

An hour later, I returned to the house. By now it was dark, almost nine o'clock. My steps were heavy, stomach in knots, despair dragging out any hope for a quick resolution as I dialed Tom's number.

"Hi Wanda, what's up?"

"Dr. Tom, Cotton's been in labor for hours and when I called Dr. Rich, he said just wait because these things take time. For pete's sake, how much time does he mean? This just doesn't seem right. She should have dropped that foal



long ago,” I wailed.

“Oh Wanda, I don’t know what to tell you. Dr. Rich has the vet truck and my girlfriend borrowed my car. I can’t get there and without that truck, I have no medical equipment. Call Dr. Rich back right now and tell him you think something is wrong. Now!” he commanded.

One more call to Dr. Rich only yielded the same answer. Looking back at what I should have done, should have demanded may or may not have changed the outcome. Returning to Cotton, what finally became apparent was that the foal was breech, and breech presentation is a real big deal in horses. Dr. Rich might not have saved the foal, but his reluctance to even come to the farm is something I will never understand.

The next morning Dr. Tom stopped the vet truck next to the barn door, slowly stepped out and walked in to the stall. On the floor lay the dead foal, a filly. I could see the sick look in his eyes. Cotton nuzzled it again and then blinked at me. “Make it get up,” she seemed to be saying.

Dr. Tom examined Cotton and pieced back together the placenta. Retained tissue can cause a whole host of new problems for any recently delivered mare. “All there,” Tom reassured, “though the mare’s torn quite a bit.”

Cotton’s udder was bursting, ready to nurture young life. As another mare was due to foal in a few weeks, we collected as much of the priceless Colostrum, the original and ultimate nutritional supplement needed by new foals, from Cotton we could. I froze the bags of fluid silently hoping I would never need them.

I found a large plastic tarp and Dr. Tom carefully wrapped the foal. He placed the body gently in the truck and returned to the clinic to do an autopsy. Standing in the drive watching Tom drive away, Cotton’s whinnies filled the air. Dead or not, it was her baby and she wanted it back.

Rubbing my fists across my eyes, I told myself, “Well, dry your eyes. You’re of no use to anyone this way, “ Cotton’s anxiety was my first priority. Returning to the barn, smelling the scent of birthing and watching Cotton strain to get out of her stall, was more than I wanted to bear. I pulled the halter over her head, snapped the throat latch, and lead her to the crossies. That udder had to be relieved. Its veins almost bursting under the pressure.

Squirt, squirt, squirt. Milk streamed on the ground as I tugged on the nipples.

“Cotton, you have enough milk to be a dairy cow!” I exclaimed to her. She just hung her head and tolerated the discomfort. “Man, it’s a shame this all has to go to waste.”

“Waste? Why should all this go to waste?” I asked Cotton, “Hey, maybe I can find you a foster child?” Finishing up, I went to the house and looked up the number of a nearby Morgan farm. Between breeding and showing, the number of Morgans living at this farm was considerable. I knew the owners through a mutual friend, enough to say Hi when I saw them.

Marti, the wife, answered the phone. “Hi Marti, this Wanda Pooley and I’m calling to ask if you might be in need of a “wet” mare. I know this may sound silly, but you never know, right?”

Sometimes show people don’t want to delay a stellar show career of a mare just because the owner opted to breed her. Once the foal is getting along fine, it’s taken from its dam and either put on a “wet” mare or bucket fed and stalled with a goat for company. The dam is then returned to its former occupation.

“Geez, Wanda, I don’t know. We do have one possible candidate, but it’s at least a month old now. I’ll ask Doug.” Marti told me.

I could tell by the sound of her voice that she wasn’t weighing this as a possibility so I didn’t hold any hope they would be calling back soon. A couple of days later, Doug drove to the house and asked to see my mare. As we walked to the barn Doug began a series of disclaimers on why this probably wouldn’t work:

Reason one: “You know, your mare won’t like a foal this old.”

Reason two: “He’ll be too rough on her udder because he’s already banging the bucket pretty hard.”

Reason three: “She’ll probably kick the tar out of the little guy.”

Reason four: “Most of the time these things just don’t work.”

“Doug, if you think all that, why did you drive over here in the first place? I think you underestimate Cotton. She

loves all babies.” I answered to his reasons for failure.

He peered out from under the brow of his hat, “Cause you never know.”

Later that afternoon, the trailer, holding one foal and one goat, rattled up the drive. In the cab of the truck sat Doug, his wife, Marti, and Jackie, their trainer. The truck came to a stop at the barn and the three passengers exited the cab. Shoulder to shoulder they strode to the back of the trailer. Jackie went in first and untied the foal, the goat following on its heels.

“You know, could we hold off on the goat for a bit. Cotton might be willing to share a stall with this little guy, but pretty doubtful on the goat,” I said.

Jackie put the goat back in the trailer and then led the foal to me. Seems as though this little fellow had a pretty rough start to his life, too. A pitiful sight stood before me. A stud colt with a dark liver chestnut coat, he had probably been pretty striking in his first hours of birth. However, his dam had been still out with the herd when she went in labor early. The foal, unable to fend for itself and having the plight of an uncaring mother, had been bitten, stepped on, and kicked by the other horses. Now, his coat was stained from laying in a stall, his neck twisted to the left and his left ear drooped, and he had an umbilical infection. Even his growth was slowed from the lack of proper equine nurturing. What a sight!

“Well, bring him inside and let’s see what Cotton thinks of this,” I said, walking towards the barn.

“This probably won’t work. Doubt the colt will even make it, anyway.” Doug replied.

The first rule I learned afterwards is “Eliminate all unnecessary people. Only mare owner and foal handler are required.” Like I said, I didn’t learn this until the situation went awry. We had such an audience, I shouldn’t have been surprised at Cotton’s reaction.

She viewed the approaching group suspiciously; her large eyes watching warily as we herded the foal towards her.

“It smells like a goat. Yuck!” her entire being relayed to me. Cotton moved away to a corner of the stall and stuck her rump to us.

The foal, on the other hand, took one look and recognized a mobile milk bar just waiting for him. He pushed forward on his halter, straining to get at that succulent looking udder.

“Nooooo,” Cotton whirled, shaking her head at the idea of taking such an offensive creature to her bosom.

Doug gave a sign of resignation, “Yeah, that’s what I figured would happen. Mares don’t like someone else’s baby.”

Jackie jumped in quickly, “Now Doug, let me give this a try. Let’s tie up a front leg on the mare. Wanda, you get a good hold on her halter and the rest of you just shove the colt at her ank. He’ll know what to do.”

With that said, we literally ganged up on the poor horse. Her eyes rolled and a complete look of disgust came over her face, but in the end she relented. Besides she had such a sore, full udder the nursing would give her enormous relief. Cotton managed to stick her nose on the rump of the nursing foal, only to draw back in revulsion. Easy to see this was not love at first sight.

Once the foal was satiated, no one was ready to assume nature had taken its course. The wall between two of the stalls was constructed of removable boards. By taking out three of the panels, we were able to put the foal in one stall and leave Cotton in the other. That way she could see him and get used to the idea of his being around. Ha! She stood in the far corner of her stall and sulked. In the other the foal dropped to the straw and proceeded to take a nice, satisfying nap. Why, he actually looked like he was smiling!

After everyone left, I saddled one of the other horses and went for a nice long ride...to think things through. When I returned, the barn was quiet. The foal was already looking longingly at Cotton, ready for another go at her.

“Well,” I said to myself, “might as well give it another try.” Foals nurse many times through the day. A couple of hours would seem a lifetime between meals to this youngster. I tied Cotton to a stall post and slipped a rope over her leg. Then I went around to the other stall, put my arms around the foal, and herded him toward Cotton’s stall. He got the idea of where we were going quickly. When the colt scrambled in to the stall, Cotton made all kinds of threats. She glared and

she squealed, but in the end, she grudgingly allowed the foal to nurse. Me holding her halter and hanging on to the rope around her drawn up front leg.

“Cotton, you need this baby and he needs you. Come on, sweetie, just give him a chance,” I beseeched. At the colt nursed, it was a bittersweet feeling seeing this odd little horse-child nursing in place of the one I had hoped and dreamed about. I stroked Cotton’s neck and spoke soothingly to her. I told her she was wonderful for letting this nice little baby stay with her.

The next day was Sunday and I had all day to concentrate on getting Cotton to accept the foal. Again I herded the little orphan in to her stall. This time I only had to hold up one of her front legs while he sucked. Cotton still looked at the baby with scorn and she would squeal when he nursed too hard. I sensed! she was only doing this to please me. The foal, on the other hand, wasn’t at all concerned that his new mamma didn’t love him. He was more interested in seeing how well he could just deplete that wonderful, huge bag of milk.

“Free loader,” I said, shaking my head, “Just look at you. You’re one big free loader.” And the name stuck.

Cotton didn’t seem interested in doing damage to Freeloder so I decided to do some work around the barn and keep the foal in the same stall with her. Whenever he wanted to nurse, I’d just go in and hold Cotton.

“You can hold me, but you can’t make me like him, “ the look in her eyes told me.

Throughout the day Freeloder would flop down in the straw, landing on manure and urine. Pure contentment on his face. It was all I could do not to clean the stall, but if this fellow started smelling like Cotton, so much the better.

By afternoon Freeloder could manage to get his own dinner without too much resistance from Cotton, but she declared she was not going to take care of him. If he was led out of the stall, well good riddance as far as she was concerned. It was obvious she was only doing this to please me since she could see I was determined to hang around the barn and watch her. Somewhere was the key to getting my wonderful mare to accept Freeloder fully as her own. I just didn’t know what it was. Time and patience; time and patience, I told myself.

At 4:30 some people stopped by to see one of my horses and, of course, just had to see the baby. They gazed in the stall. “Oh what a pretty little foal,” they exclaimed. Cotton retorted by laying back her ears at Freeloder and nipping him on the rump. “There,” she glared, “You still can’t make me.”

When the visitors left an hour later, I walked back to the barn to check on Freeloder’s welfare. I almost dropped to the floor in amazement. Cotton stood in the center of the stall, licking Freeloder’s rump and nuzzling him protectively!

“Well, what did you expect?” her look said. I swear a sly grin escaped her lips as she turned away to continue with her motherly duties.

“Hmmm, she’s trying to trick me,” I thought. Stepping in the stall, I put my arms around Freeloder and started pushing him out the door. Seeing me do this, Cotton became very anxious, nickering to her baby. When I let Freeloder go, he scampered to her side and she stepped between both of us. He was her baby forever as far as she was concerned.

The next day, Cotton and Freeloder were turned out in a small grassy pasture where she promptly turned tail to the air and trotted her charge to the far end for safe keeping. A few days of romping in the sun, nursing from his mom and just being content were all the medicine Freeloder needed to make him right. His little bent neck straightened and the left ear now matched the right ear. His coat became glossy and his belly round.

As I watched the two of them running across the pasture, I couldn’t help but experience a pang of sadness for the lost little filly. However, I’m reminded that no matter what, some questions have no answers, but nature always finds a way to solve its problems.