



Choosing the right mare

As mentioned in the previous article “The Ethos of Breeding”, owners and breeders should be mindful of the ethical and financial implications of breeding, as well as the long term implications.

A mare should not be bred too early as, if she is still growing, she will not be able to provide nourishment for her own as well as her foal’s, development. Although most mares start cycling by the age of two, ideally mares should not be bred before the age of three, with a view to foaling down at four or later. Alternatively, older mares may find it harder to conceive, especially if their first pregnancy is after the age of ten.

First foals and foals of older mares are often smaller in stature. Conformation of the mare is important, both as regards her reproductive tract and her body in general.

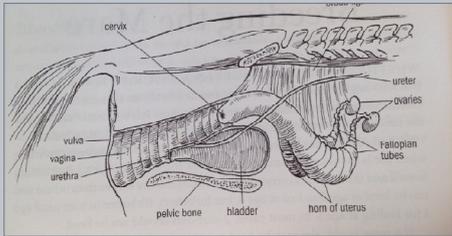
Obviously, mares with soundness problems pose two questions – firstly, if the soundness issue is conformational, it may be hereditary, and secondly, an unsound mare will become worse with the added weight of pregnancy. Also mares who are underweight may not come into season, will not be able to nourish the growing foetus properly, and those who are overweight may also struggle to conceive as excess body fat interferes with the hormonal cycle.

All vaccinations should be up to date, as should the de-worming schedule. Some limb, body and dental abnormalities are strongly hereditary and, if there is any doubt, you should rather not breed the mare.

In terms of conformation of the genital tract, mares with down-sloping vagina or sunken rectum may have an increased chance of contracting uterine infection (due to faecal matter falling into the vagina) and decreased chance of conception. Loose vulval lips can also allow faecal matter from the rectum, infection or air to enter the vagina – called a pneumovagina – which predisposes to infection. Gaping or loose vulval lips may be corrected by your vet

suturing the lips together (all but the bottom part) – this is called a Caslick Stitch. The skin will then grow together over the period of the pregnancy and will have to be opened under local anaesthetic before the mare delivers (to decrease the risk of tearing).

A HEALTHY GENITAL TRACT AND UTERUS as seen above, has a seal at the vulva and another at the vestibule (inside the vagina) and a third seal at the cervix. In addition, the sticky mucous present in the healthy genital tract helps to prevent air and infection entering. A healthy genital tract is obviously important for any

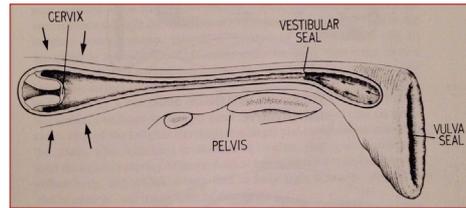


mare to carry and sustain the foal – any scarring can be problematic, as well as infection and any congenital abnormalities. If there is any doubt about an infection being present, the vet may take a swab of the vagina or cervix. Just inside the vulva the clitoris can be found - it has three sinuses which may be the hiding place for CEM (contagious equine metritis) and these sinuses should be swabbed if there is any suspicion that the mare has been exposed to CEM. A normal cervix is high in the vaginal at diestrus and moves downwards as estrus progresses so that, at ovulation, the cervix is sitting low on the floor of the vagina and is lax and receptive to incoming semen. The cervix should not be scarred nor have



any sign of infection. After estrus the cervix returns to the high, tight position and may have a fold over the external os (a capped cervix), which is usually a sign of pregnancy.

A NORMAL UTERUS (seen above) is T-shaped with 2 short horns and a central body. Tumours,



cysts, atrophy, scarring and congenital abnormalities may make the mare unsuitable for breeding. Vets can examine the uterus and ovaries through the rectum – the uterus is about 50cm in from the anal margin – and the vagina can be examined using a speculum and light. Many breeding vets do a routine uterine swab for infection and cytology for any structural abnormality of the uterus. An examination of the udder should also be done, to ensure no abnormalities, masses or signs of infection (mastitis). Much expense and heartache can be saved by picking up problems in your mare before trying to breed her, and making a realistic decision about her soundness as a brood mare before committing to getting her into foal.



Talent & Temperament

Another important consideration when it comes to choosing a broodmare is temperament. You don't want to duplicate a nasty temperament, nor a talentless mare if you are looking for a competing horse. If the situation allows, spend time with the mare, even better, ride her a few times. Ideally, if she is your mare, you will know her well and be able to make a sound judgement. As with the horse in the picture, she should work comfortably and happily on the flat, and in whatever discipline you are planning for her foal, as her foal is very likely to be a lot like her.

Ten questions to ask yourself about your potential broodmare

1. Is she old enough/too old to carry a foal?
2. Has she been previously bred?
3. How many foals has she delivered?
4. Has she had any foaling problems?
5. How many cycles does she usually take to conceive?
6. Has she had any abortions or lost pregnancies?
7. Has she had previous treatment for infection of the genital tract?
8. When was her last foal?
9. Does she have any conformational defects?
10. Does she cycle regularly?