



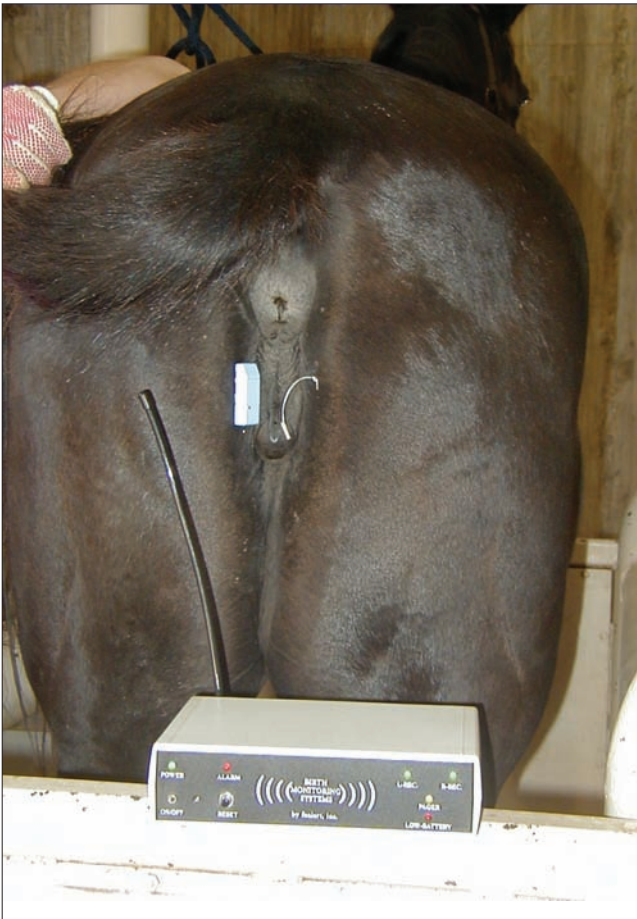
*Horse Care*

## Foalert: Monitoring Foaling Mares

by HEATHER SMITH THOMAS

Foaling monitors are very helpful in letting you know when a mare is starting to give birth, so you can be there at the proper time. One of the most effective systems, the Foalert, was developed by Steve Lee, DVM, in Georgia. "He started with this concept back in the early 1980's," says Tom Earley, DVM (one of the veterinarians affiliated with the company that makes and markets this system). Unfortunately, Steve passed away at a young age (from a brain tumor) before he saw the final success of his idea.

"Steve wanted to come up with something better than the foaling monitoring systems that were on the market at that time. His major stimulus for this was that the other systems sometimes gave false alarms; they could be triggered just by the mare lying down flat while sleeping. Steve said that with even with a video camera in the barn, someone has to be there to watch the video. As I remember, he would occasionally get calls from some of his clients who thought their mare was foaling, and he'd go out to their farm and it was a false alarm. So he was looking for something scientific that had more reliability," explains Earley.



"This stimulated him to start doing research, looking at ideas. He realized that if he could measure the separation of the vulva lips, this would be more accurate," says Earley. The idea was not new. Someone in the 1940's had already thought about it, but the technology was not available at that time to provide the necessary equipment.

Steve Lee started looking for people to help him develop the technology, including some engineers at Georgia Tech. He started experimenting with the idea of a small transmitter that could be sutured on one side of the vulva, with a small activating device attached to the other side—so the spreading of the vulva lips would then trigger-activate the transmitter. From 1983 until 1988, he went through several manufacturing trials before he finally got a transmitter that was accurate. During that development period he was able to get about a dozen of his friends (some of them clients) to invest in the company, for seed money to get it developed. Over that period of time, they were able to come up with a product and started marketing it in 1990.

"The first models were tried on numerous breeding farms here in Georgia and in Kentucky. Units were also sent to the University of Utrecht in Holland. Castleton Farms, Dr. Walter Zent at Hagyard, Davidson and McGee in Lexington, Dr. Peter Rothdale (in a research group at Newmarket, England), Hawkeye Farm, Crystal Springs Farm, Ashford Stud and other breeding farms used it. The fact they were willing to try it speaks to the fact that people were looking for something reliable. Dr. Van Snow (one of the veterinarians for the Olympic team in California) also helped with field testing of the product. Then, in the spring of 1991, the product was represented at Equitana in Germany. There were many people who wanted to make sure it would be accepted," says Earley.

The system is foolproof as long as the transmitter is positioned and installed properly. "As long as the mare is within the correct distance of the receiver, it should work every time. The times there have been problems have been due to human errors, such as if the transmitter was not sutured on properly. If you don't get enough bite into the skin of the vulva when suturing it, and the transmitter stays in place too long (several weeks), the transmitter may tear out. On rare occasions, a mare may back up against something and rub, and might disengage the magnet or set off a false alarm. Thus it is important that it be sutured correctly, and then it is very reliable," explains Earley.

It is very rare for a mare to have a malpresentation in which nothing starts coming through the birth canal; the

**Continued on page 76**



Horse Care Cont'd.

water bag or feet of the foal will usually be spreading the lips of the vulva. "Our German distributor is the wife of the breed manager of the largest Standardbred farm in Europe. They've documented some breech presentations (in which the foal's rump presses against the cervix and no feet enter the birth canal) where the mare's straining will actually pull the magnet apart, even though no portion of the foal is entering the birth canal," says Early. "There are very few breech presentations in mares; many veterinarians who have been in practice 20 years or more have never seen one. But of a few that have occurred in mares using the Foalert, the vulva lips were separated enough to trigger the alarm."

You can adjust how tight the device fits on the vulva, by where you tie the knot on the magnet—to determine how much tension there is before the magnet is pulled out of the transmitter. If you make it too tight, it might pull apart too readily. "If the mare has a heavy vulva and lies down, the weight of the vulva itself might pull it apart. Yet if the sutures are too long (loose) you could have a good part of the foal coming through before the magnet separated," explains Early. After a person has installed one of these several times, he/she gets a feel for how tight the sutures should be.

"Most people use about a 2 1/2-inch knot from where the magnet is, and tie that in. Then the alarm is triggered

either when the water bag first separates the vulva lips, or if the foal's foot or muzzle is coming through," explains Early.

The transmitter is usually sutured onto the vulva about two weeks before the mare is due to foal. It's recommended that you check it every day and gently wash it off if it gets caked with manure. If you have several mares, you need a transmitter for each mare, but only one receiver. Mares must be within 200 feet of the standard receiver or 1,000 to 1,200 feet from a long range receiver. When the transmitter is activated by separation of the vulva lips (as when the water bag starts through the birth canal), an alarm goes off in the barn. You can also be alerted by pager, or telephone (using an automatic dialer for whatever numbers you program into the system), or a secondary alarm in your home. Each transmitter can be used up to 10 or 12 times (for subsequent foalings), if properly cared for. The batteries are not replaceable since they are hermetically sealed to keep out moisture (which would short out the system).

Marketing of the product began in 1990 and 1991. "Those of us who were intimately involved with the company would go to horse shows and veterinary shows and set up a booth, and introduce it that way. As the company grew, we put ads in various magazines and went to more trade shows, and information about the product also spread by word of mouth," he says.

Continued on page 78

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Horse Name	G1	G2	G3	E	CSI
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ASHADO	7	4	0	7	10
ROCK OF GIBRALTAR	7	1	1	7	8
FANTASTIC LIGHT	7	1	1	14	7
COONAREE	5	4	1	8	7
DARBA MAJOR	5	2	0	7	12
SHESTON	5	2	0	7	7
DIVINE PROPORTIONS	4	2	2	7	5
RUSSIAN RHYTHM	4	1	1	7	5
GRASS WONDER	4	1	0	7	8
EXOTIC WOOD	4	1	0	14	7
WHIPPER	4	1	0	7	5
GOLD ALLURE	4	0	0	7	11
PEEPING FARM	4	0	0	7	8
SERENADE ROSE	3	3	0	7	7
PI TOMBE	3	2	1	7	5
STREET SENSE	3	1	1	7	5
STORMING HOME	3	1	0	14	11
DARNA SCARLET	3	1	0	7	8
EL CONDOR PASA	3	1	0	7	5
HARLAN'S HOLIDAY	3	0	2	10	5
AMERICAN POST	3	0	1	8	10
DESERT KING	3	0	1	7	8
SOUTHERN IMAGE	3	0	0	10	13
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76 CALIFORNIA THOROUGHBRED • JANUARY 2008

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## Horse Care Cont'd.

"This system is generally what veterinarians recommend to their clients. We have a tremendous number of veterinarians who use and advocate this product, probably because of the reliability factor. The disadvantage of having to suture it on may discourage small breeders, and even some larger breeders who may not want to do this nor call a vet to do it. In many large operations, however, the breed manager or farm manager sutures it on. But some people prefer to have something simpler, that they can put on the horse themselves," he says.

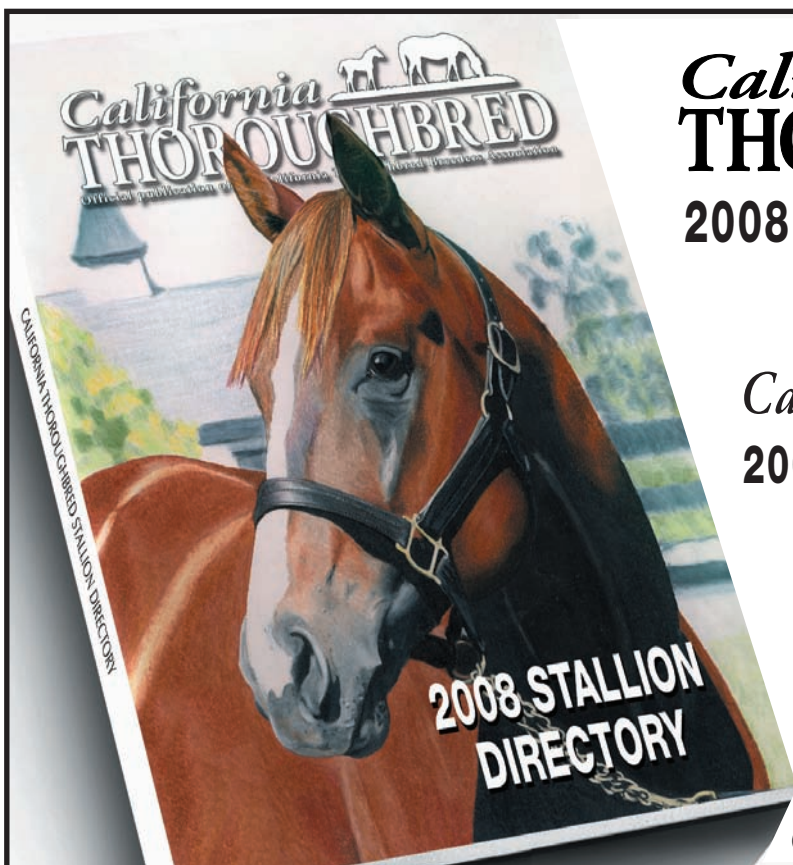
The product is sold in many countries around the world, in Europe, Australia and South America. "Some of the large Thoroughbred farms use it, even though many of them still have night watchmen. They may use the Foalart on some of the more valuable or high risk mares, for instance. It's also used in more than 29 veterinary schools. The Budweiser Clydesdale breeders use it. It's amazing how many foals can be saved if someone can be there, whether it's our product or another product that enables the horseman to know when a mare is foaling," he says. There are so many things that can go wrong—even simple things like the sac not coming off the foal's head. If you are there, you can make a difference.

"This product is probably the most scientific; it's truly a veterinary obstetrical device. This was the intention of Dr. Steve Lee; he wanted something veterinarians would feel comfortable with. A number of veterinarians have found that

small breeders (clients who breed only one or two mares a year) tend to not buy these products, so some veterinary practices are buying additional systems and leasing them to their small breeders. This allows the small breeder to have the most up-to-date technology without such a large expense. This is a service that can be offered, and it helps the veterinarian pay for the equipment. And it saves a lot of foals. We've developed a brochure we distribute to veterinarians, to make them aware of this opportunity. A lot of them have never thought about this, particularly practices that don't do a lot of foaling in their clinic. Now they can buy it and offer it as a service to some of their breeders," says Earley.

"I do a lot of the trade shows, and I am still running into people who met Steve or worked with Steve year ago. They all have extremely fond memories and great respect for him. His wife Beth is still involved with the company. In the early years when he had a veterinary practice and was struggling to get the Foalart product off the ground—running the business along with his practice—he kept telling her that someday this would put their kids through college. Now Beth reminds me, as their kids are reaching college age, that even though she had her doubts back then, the company is now providing enough to get the kids to college," says Early.

The early years were tough. "Steve put a lot of his own money into it, and had to go out and beg for more, from friends and colleagues, and some of his clients. But they all believed in what he was trying to do, and their faith in his dream has now been realized." ■



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