



Horse Care

Breeding The Maiden Mare

by **HEATHER SMITH THOMAS**

A maiden mare is a mare (young or old) who has never been bred before. There are sometimes challenges that arise with a maiden mare that are not encountered with a veteran broodmare. It may take a little more patience and effort to get her bred.

For successful breeding, a mare should not be bred until she is mature and full grown. Some mares mature more quickly than others and can be bred at three years of age, to foal at four, while others do better if you wait until they are four years old to be bred. In most instances, a two-year-old is too young to breed. At the other extreme, a 12-year-old mare who has never been bred may be harder to get in foal than a mare of the same age who has had foals before. The reproductive tract continues to age (and will suffer degenerative changes) whether or not the mare has had foals. The ideal age to breed a mare for the first time is between four and seven years.

Fillies and mares retiring from an athletic career may need a period of “let down” before being bred. A mare who is in extremely fit physical condition, with little excess body fat, may not cycle properly. She needs time for her body to adjust and become more prepared for reproduction. Several months at pasture with some other mares she gets along with can help her make the transition from athlete to broodmare.

Breeding Soundness Exam

Before breeding, every mare should have an examination by a veterinarian to make sure her reproductive tract is healthy—with no problems that might interfere with her ability to conceive and carry a foal to term. Just because a mare has never been bred before does not automatically mean she won't have a uterine infection. Even though prior breedings and foalings are the most common cause of infection, conformation of the tract may predispose a maiden mare to problems. For example, a tipped vulva—anus sunken forward, allowing fecal material to slide over the vulva and fall into the vagina—may create ideal conditions for a vaginal infection, which may eventually ascend into the uterus.

Occasionally during a breeding soundness exam, a maiden mare is found to have an improperly developed reproductive tract or a congenital defect or some other problem (such as a cystic ovary) that would interfere with reproduction. More common in a maiden mare is an imperforate hymen (an obstructing membrane partition). This can be corrected during the exam, so the membranes won't be torn during breeding (which could lead to infection). It's better to correct this with sterile instruments, allowing the mare

at least two or three weeks to heal before being bred, so she won't be sore at the time of breeding, if she's to be bred by natural cover.

Teasing The Maiden Mare

A mare who has never been bred may be more “shy” than a veteran broodmare; it may take more diligent teasing to determine when she's in heat, and also to persuade her to accept the stallion. She may need time to adjust after an athletic career and shift gears, to relax enough to be comfortable with her new role as a broodmare. If she has not been courted by a stallion before, she may be timid, and easily “turned off” by an overly aggressive teaser. It's best if she can live near a stallion for a while, so she can see and hear him, and become acquainted—rather than suddenly being confronted with a stallion at breeding time.

Many mares, especially maiden mares, won't submit to breeding unless they first undergo a lengthy teasing and courtship. The art of proper teasing (and use of a well-mannered stallion) is essential to successful breeding. Most mares show stronger estrus the more they are teased, and many won't accept the stallion without this teasing process. For a shy maiden mare who won't show heat, you need to tease her regularly, in an environment where she feels comfortable and not threatened by the stallion—and then she will finally show heat.

Tips For Safe Breeding

Once you determine the mare is in heat and ready to accept the stallion, tease her again just before breeding, to make sure she will be cooperative, and to encourage her to urinate and defecate. Then wrap her tail in a clean bandage.



This keeps the tail hairs from cutting the stallion's penis and keeps the tail hairs out of the way. Wash her genital area and buttocks with a mild soap, rinse well and dry thoroughly with paper towels.

Breeding should take place in a safe, open area where there is plenty of room to move around, good footing and no dust. Some breeders use breeding hobbles, to keep the mare from kicking the stallion, but hobbles can be a hazard to both mare and stallion if he gets tangled up in them. It's better to just make sure the mare is ready to accept the stallion. If she's nervous, she may need quite a bit of steadying to keep her from moving around too much. If she is quite nervous, or prone to kick, a twitch or Stableizer may be used briefly (until the stallion has mounted and entered her) and then it can be released. If you think you need to hobble her to protect the stallion, the hobbles should fit properly, and have a quick-release feature for safety's sake. Put them on her several times before the actual breeding, so that she is accustomed to the hobbles and at ease with them.

When breeding a maiden mare, it's often best to have three people—one to handle the stallion, one to hold the mare steady, and one to hold her tail to one side and make sure the stallion enters properly. The stallion should be well mannered and not overly aggressive or he may intimidate a maiden mare and she may try to avoid him or kick at him. He should not be led up directly behind her or she will try to turn and face him.

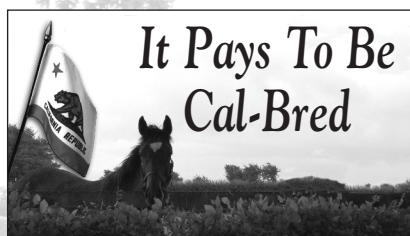
In a natural breeding situation at pasture, the stallion always approaches the mare's head and courts her, to make sure of her willingness before he puts himself at risk for being kicked. After a final teasing to make sure she is ready, the mare should be quickly prepared for breeding and he should be led up to her at a 45-degree angle so that she can see him. He should be well mannered and approach calmly. Let him mount her from the hip and work his way back to a proper position, so he can be assured of her cooperation.

Some people like to use a solid panel in front of the mare (with her head over it and her chest up to the fence so she can't go forward). The mare will always move forward a step or two as the stallion mounts, but the solid panel keeps her from lunging forward and gives her something to brace against. Moving forward a little helps prevent injury to the mare and allows the stallion to find his proper position, but the mare should not rush forward.

The person handling the mare should hold her head high as the stallion starts to mount; this will help keep her from kicking. If she starts to kick, the mare holder should pull her head around toward the stallion to turn her hindquarters away from him. Some mares will also kick as the stallion starts to dismount, so the mare handler should be prepared for this possibility as well.

With careful planning, good management and conscientious handling, the breeding of a maiden mare is more likely to be accomplished smoothly and without problems. 🐾

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