

LAST CHANCE CORRAL



HOPE FOR HORSES
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Happy Holidays from the "Horsenage"

As the holidays' warm embrace is upon us, remember to take a moment from your celebrations to be grateful for, and appreciate, all that you have in your life. Give pause to consider those with so much less. Perhaps we all have room in our hearts to extend the kindness and generosity of this brief season into the new year by sharing self and bounty with those in need.

"Always be a little kinder than necessary"

Those of us here, at Last Chance Corral, know that the holiday season precedes our next foal season. I cannot help but to be excited! Along with that excitement, there is a level of apprehension that follows. I would be lying if I said there was not. Let's be honest, this is a BIG job with a large helping of stress. The responsibility of caring for the lives of these fragile foals is full of joy and sadness. Seeing healthy foals jump into the trailers that are leading them to their new, loving homes is a beautiful thing. It makes the long days and sleepless nights so meaningful in the end.

A Day in the Life .. The arrival of foals

When I back the trailer into the driveway that leads up to our foal barn, my courageous crew is waiting, at the ready, to meet and welcome these foals into their new lives at Last Chance Corral. There is warm milk in buckets, and we begin the process of assessing the needs of our new group of babies. Upon arrival, the orphan foals need to be evaluated and entered in to the "Last Chance Corral Database" (Our communication system that identifies the newbies). It is not all that high-tech. We have a little, old rolltop desk with a series of folders and a cork board called "Foal Command Central".

There is a heavy emphasis on observation during the development of their charts. The first concern regards drinking- some foals will go right up to a bucket and begin to drink. For most of the foals, however, that is seldom the case. The only means of acquiring sustenance that these foals know is the instinctual need to nurse. Buckets and bowls of warm milk mean nothing to them, yet. We work around this obstacle with patience and understanding. We comfort the visibly distressed foals and introduce the concept of drinking milk out of buckets slowly. This is not a one-and-done situation, and we often need to revisit foals multiple times to ensure they are able to make the transition successfully.

While my team is working on the above process, I am compiling individual charts that include the foals' age, sex, general condition, injuries, or anomalies, along with a sketch of their color and markings. I am also highly experienced in the nurse-to-drink transition (I started bucket training calves on my family's dairy farm when I was seven years old!) and will often find myself helping the foals that need a little extra attention. The information we gather during these initial observations allows our veterinarian, who arrives shortly after, to have a better idea of where each foal stands medically, and which ones may need treatment.

We make notes of urination (frequency, color, amount), bowel movements (or lack thereof), and amount of milk ingested. The entire process goes on for hours! This is a traumatic transition for all foals involved, but some take it harder than others. If we notice that a foal is dehydrated and too distressed to drink, we will use a nasogastric feeding tube to get that ever-important first meal into their stomachs and jumpstart their digestive system. Any foal that is visibly struggling to pass a bowel movement will receive a warm-water enema (or two), as needed.

As previously mentioned, the transition from knowing how to nurse to learning how to drink can be a difficult one to make. It may take a collected effort by our team to get particularly angry foals to settle down and drink. Often two or three Last Chance Corral team members struggle to work on one foal. Steel-toes boots and quick responses will save you some bruises. Each foal is a unique individual and the way they process the emotional loss of their mother varies. Some foals are depressed, with heads hanging low and eyes devoid of spirit. Other foals are angry and desperate, running, calling out, searching for safety and comfort. These are stressful moments, and while our team comforts as best we can, many of the foals tend to take comfort in each other.

Now, you may wonder: "If teaching foals to drink from buckets is so difficult, why not use bottles"? Our reasoning for bucket-feeding as opposed to bottle-feeding is this:

Speaking strictly on a logistical standpoint, it would be physically impossible for the team to sufficiently bottle-feed each foal around-the-clock. There are simply too many. The risk of underfeeding is too high a price to pay. I can get help from 9A.M.-4P.M., the rest is up to Dr. Rourke (after her day at the clinic) and me.

The risk of aspiration pneumonia increases when an artificial nipple is introduced as replacement for an udder.

Foals can become inappropriately dependent on humans. This stunts their ability to develop and differentiate appropriate relationships between humans and other horses, thus negatively impacting and limiting their future success.

When observing a mother and foal, you will notice that nursing happens frequently and not necessarily for very long. They consume many small meals. The buckets of milk present the foal with the opportunity to feed, free choice. The foals will drink more often, receiving a series of small meals. This also benefits the design of their digestive system. If intermittently offered a bottle throughout the day, the foal tends to aggressively overeat. This could lead to aspiration pneumonia, as mentioned earlier, diarrhea, or colic.

