



■ FEATURES

# REARING AN ORPHAN FOAL

by Caroline Sussex



Shuja - managing without her mum

Photo: Caroline Sussex

**WHILST FOALING** can be a joyous time, there are also many cases when tragedy hits in various forms. The more foals you breed, the more likely you are to have tragedies and you can be sure they will be different every time. Sadly, I have lost foals on various occasions, all different reasons, and I did not offer my mare up for fostering. Having now had the unfortunate experience of being on the other end, with a lively bouncy foal wanting a mother, I would always offer a good brood mare to foster a foal.

Losing a foal is devastating, losing a mare during foaling must be even worse but you are not fighting a battle with getting a mare to accept a foal. This last reason for an orphan foal has to be the most upsetting of all. Sadly we had this experience at Binley this year when a strong healthy filly foal, was rejected by her mother. Nothing can be more frightening than a mare who appears to dislike her foal, especially a sweet mare who you love so much.

Why does it happen? This was in fact the mare's second foal. In 2007, she had a terrible foaling, a wrong presentation and a dead foal

was eventually pulled out. We were fortunate that she was not damaged in any way but her milk dried up very quickly after this and she did not want us milking her. Whether this

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bad foaling had an effect, I cannot say but it is possible. It seemed to us that she did not have the normal maternal instincts and did not know what to do. In fact, you could describe her as never having matured mentally, and very much wanting all the attention. My horses grow up in a herd situation and so the hierarchy teaches them how to be a horse. I cannot recall what

happened to the dam of the foal, her mother definitely looked after her and fed her with no problems. However, this mare always had to be with you in the field and we used to joke that she did not need to be taught "join up" as she always joined up when we went into the field. We felt this little thing, now the centre of attention, could have been another reason that the mare did not like it.

A friend in Australia had told me about a drug she used prior to foaling and after birth which changed the mare's hormones and helped her accept the foal. The drug is called modocate. Not all vets in the UK know about this drug, but I was to find out that many do and have used it successfully to make a mare accept her foal. Unfortunately you do not know prior to birth with a maiden mare if she will accept or reject a foal so giving the drug prior to foaling is not really an option unless the family are suspected. According to my friend in Australia, the drug works and she would never be without it. The drug is a human drug and comes with many warnings of severe side effects. However, no side effects have ever been seen in mares as far as I know





Simana with 3 day old Shuja

Photo: Caroline Sussex

and in any case, if your mare is a brood mare, then it must be worth using the drug. I would not hesitate.

Modecate ideally should be injected one week before birth. Failing that, any time before birth and if birth shows a possible rejection situation, there is a chance it will work, if it is injected within twenty four hours of birth. However, it is essential that enough of the drug must be put in the mare, too little and it will not have the desired effect of enough sedation. The drug must also be topped up regularly and in the UK vets will probably insist on doing this themselves because of the side effects possible. As far as I am aware, the foal is not affected by the drug.

My foal was born last summer at the end of May. We had thought the mare would go a few more days as although she was slack in the vulva, there was no milk or wax. I was therefore lucky to find her foaling, as I flicked over my TV screen to see her down foaling in broad daylight at 8.00pm. I rushed outside and did have to go in to help her out. It was a normal presentation but I think one leg may have been stuck. I managed and all seemed well, I quickly got out of the stable and watched quietly outside. There was a whinny from the mare to foal and I waited quietly but nothing else. After a time the mare got up and I was rather worried as she was not very careful where she walked and then went straight over and ate hay. She also seemed a little frightened of the foal and did not like the afterbirth, hanging

down from her back end. I did not know about the milk situation at this stage and decided to get help. I phoned my mother and sister and they came over. I then phoned the vet who had some colostrum which I collected in case we needed it. On my return I found my sister in the stable holding the mare as the foal was trying to drink and things were not going well. This was the first sign of serious problems.

We called the vet out and he sedated the

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mare and gave her oxytocin and milked off the colostrum which was in fact in good supply and the foal was bottle fed. That night we had to stay with the mare and after a second feed of milking her, we got the foal on the udder and the mare seemed to accept this. We went through the night with this procedure. The next day as the weather was good we turned them both out. We had given the mare ACP. It seemed that the mare would take the foal as the mare would stand when the foal drank but sadly we made the decision to bring the mare in at night (which was our normal procedure) so we could be

sure all was well and gave her more ACP on direction. With hindsight that was a big mistake. I will never use ACP again. I was in touch with another breeder who was also trying to get a mare to take a foal and they had also found that ACP was not helpful.

As a result of bringing them in, things definitely went very wrong. It is possible the enclosed space did not help. That night was not a good one as although we were able to milk the mare without any trouble, the foal was not allowed to feed from her and we had to separate them as it was getting dangerous. At three in the morning, we were pretty desperate as the mare's milk seemed to be going and we did not have foal milk to substitute. We called a local Equine clinic in desperation and fortunately they had some milk powder so we set out and fetched it. Relief at last that the foal had had a long drink. The foal was by this time very adept at drinking from the bottle. The next morning the mare was given the modecate. I rang the National Foaling Bank to be told that I was case number 300+ but Joanna Vardon was very helpful. She suggested we tried to keep the mare's milk going by putting cocoa powder into her feed. She was also interested in the drug. The vet left us with oxytocin and we were able to get much more milk off the mare using this injection first and were still persevering with getting the foal to drink from her. Unfortunately, we did not have enough of the modecate drug in the mare and this may have been the last chance of getting her to take the foal.



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Shuja feeding in her corral, with Sa'ilah keeping a watchful eye

Photo: Caroline Sussex

After five days of feeding and milking the mare, a local Thoroughbred stud team and some friends kindly came in and sent me to bed whilst they sat up all night and tried to get the mare to take the foal. At this stage, we all decided that she was losing her milk and we were losing the battle. It was with some relief that we decided to bottle feed the foal but made sure she suckled from her mother on every other drink except through the night. The foal was by now in the next door stable, we have a low dividing wall so she could see her mother. They were not safe in a stable together. However, we were able to turn them out together. The foal had already learnt not to get close to her mother and with the drug in the mare, she was under sedation and she accepted this little thing following her as long as she did not try to drink. When we held the mare, the foal was able to drink. There was one time when one of our team found the foal drinking from the mare on her own but sadly this did not last.

As the weather was good in June, we turned the mare and foal out and fed the foal in the field as fortunately only one feed was given in pitch darkness. The foal was

always waiting for her feed or would come cantering over if you called "foaly". I had not even thought to name her! In fact, I had not done much thinking through all this, it was an impossible thing to do! We also had decided that if a foster mare came up we would definitely accept for the sake of the foal.

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No foster mare came up and once we had done ten days of feeding we decided to stick with it. A strict rota was put in place and help from my friends and workers was so good that we managed to feed the foal and get some sleep. However, for two months my sleep pattern was non-existent as constant waking up means you never get the proper sleep.

We continued with the feeding, extending the times when we were able to under the instructions, but each time we changed things, the foal's stomach would get upset so all changes had to be done very gradually. I was kindly given Saracen's Foal Starter Mix by Nicki McGee of Saracen Feeds who was so helpful to me. This would supplement the foal's feeding. She got used to this and we built her a corral where only she could go with her feed in it thus enabling her to feed whenever she wanted. At the end of six weeks or so we gave up forcing the mare to give the foal milk and once she was two months, we put them in our big field getting them in at night as feeding in the dark in a big field was impossible. I named the foal Binley Shuja (Arabic means "Courage" or "Valiant").

We were very careful not to humanise Shuja and at three weeks we put in two mares in with her and her mother and then in the big field at two months, she became very good friends with my yearling, Binley Golden Reverie. They are the best of friends and Reverie is kind enough to act as a mother to Shuja. Shuja only leaves her when Reverie shows off too much and she thinks it



might be safer with an older mare! She would go to her mother in a panic who accepted that situation. Shuja has lived with her mother every day of her life and still does. Sadly, there is really no bond there but her mother is not bossy to her. The mares all looked after her and Shuja led a normal life with the herd.

I contacted quite a few people during this time and there are many things that I learnt. I would tackle a similar situation very differently if it happened again.

First, if a mare looked like rejecting, I would get the drug modocate into the mare immediately and make sure it was enough to make her very sedated. I would insist that the mare has pain killer for a few days to ensure that she is not in pain when the foal is trying to suckle. I would also immediately ask everywhere for a foster mother for the foal, as long as the distance was not too great, in case other things did not work. A foal needs a mother if at all possible.

I would always have some foal powder, the most well known is Aintree Foal Milk, available at foaling just in case. If all else fails, I would get the foal onto the calf mix Denkavit which is the same as most foaling milk powders. This is normally given to cows and I have recently heard that it can be made up and lasts for at least twelve hours. With an apparatus set up so that foals can self feed, I could have prevented being up every night feeding! I wish I had known that one. I did enquire about this product but I was not sure it would have worked in the heat or the field and I was concerned the foal would not have drunk so had decided against changing the diet as my foal scoured so badly when I did so. In future I would definitely change feeds.

The foal must have a companion either a pony, goat, sheep, older mare or youngster and the more the merrier. Once old enough, putting the foal with other horses and foals as a playmate is a definite advantage.

I am so very grateful to all the people who came and helped me during the difficult time in the Summer and gave me some night's sleep. There were many of them and without their help it would have been much harder but I was up six out of seven nights all week on my own which was hard going. I would avoid that situation again at all costs.

I would like to help anyone who is in this unfortunate situation. I would like to hear the experiences of people who have had to look after and feed orphan foals so that anyone who finds themselves in this position can get helpful information easily and quickly. Please do send in any information that you think may be of help and we will post it all on our website so people can find information fast. ■



Shuja at 6 1/2 weeks - thriving despite rejection

Photo: Lesley Thiel

## NATIONAL FOALING BANK

The National Foaling Bank was founded 43 years ago by Miss Johanna E Vardon MBE. She has dealt with 71,000 calls for help, of which 17,273 cases of dead mares and foals. Arabians are the worst for rejecting foals.

### *The purpose of the National Foaling Bank is:*

- To provide an adoption service for orphan foals
  - Take on impossible cases of savaging mares
- Problem foaling mares (haemolytic, cancer, twinning)
  - Foals that need 24 hour nursing
- Keeping a record of breeders holding colostrum for the benefit of current paid up members.
  - Dealing with cases over the phone
  - Telephone advice available round the clock

To continue the National Foaling Bank urgently needs you all to contribute on an annual basis. You never know when it could be you in trouble and needing their assistance.

Please help them to continue this wonderful service.

Vardon Trust, National Foaling Bank, Meretown Stud, Newport, Shropshire TF10 8BX  
 Telephone: 01952 811234; Fax: 01952 811202  
 Website: [www.nationalfoalingbank.com](http://www.nationalfoalingbank.com)

### **AINTREE FOAL MILK** is available from:

Battles, Hayward and Bower Limited, Crofton Drive, Allenby Road Industrial Estate, Lincoln LN3 4NP.

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