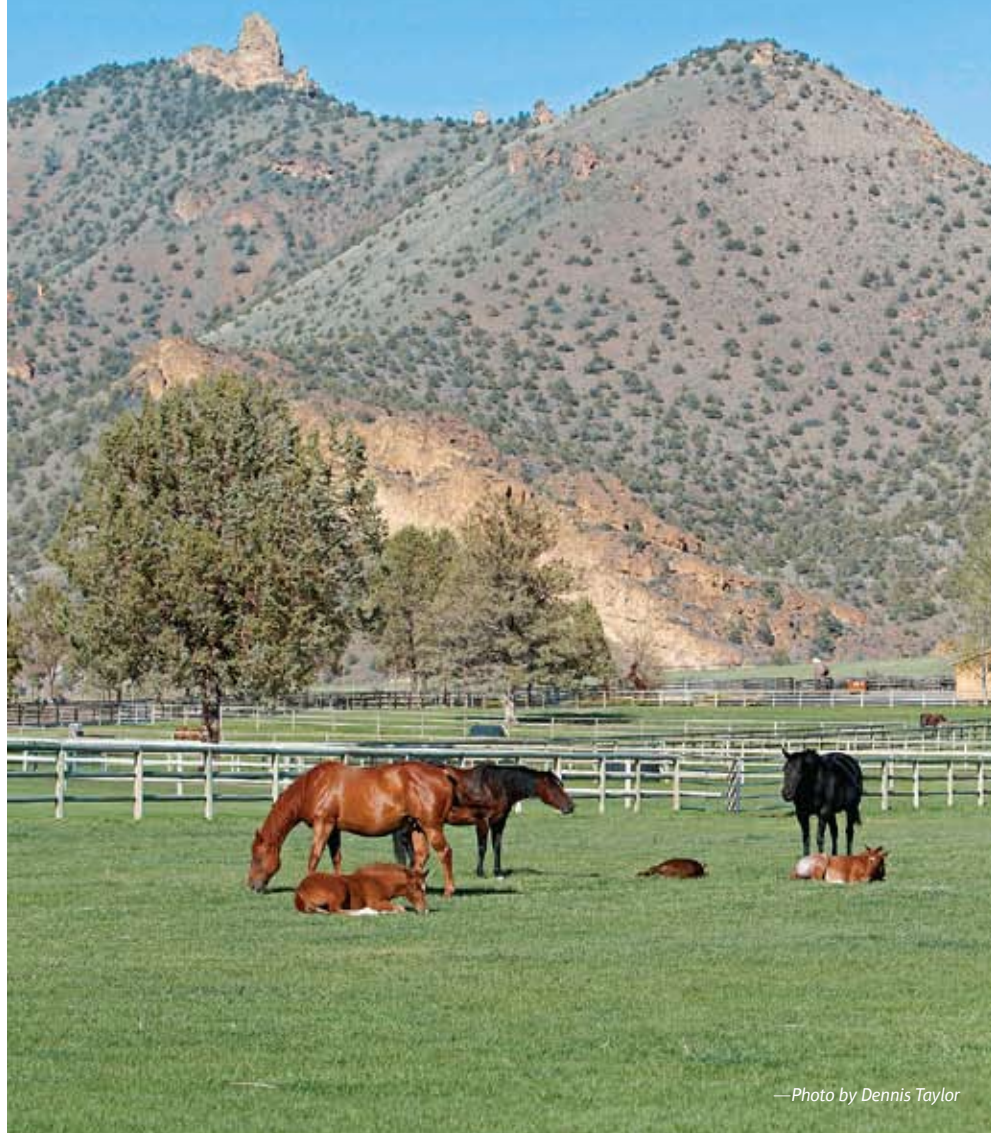


Circle of Life

A tragic loss, followed by a miraculous bond, makes one special birth at Coyote Rock Ranch unforgettable. By Stephanie Duquette



—Photo by Dennis Taylor

Around 2:30 a.m. on Thursday, March 31, in a foaling stall at Coyote Rock Ranch in Terrebonne, Ore., a healthy sorrel filly nosed her way into the world. Her mother was a recipient mare whose vast girth had everyone expecting a whopper of a baby. Surprisingly, the filly was petite and dainty.

Coyote Rock Ranch Manager Sue Hagerty watched the newborn sort out her wobbly legs, relieved the surrogate mother she called “Texas” had safely delivered the foal by Hydrive Cat (High Brow Cat x Ruby Tuesday DNA x Peppy San Badger) and out of TM Quiver (Smart Little Ricochet x Shes Pretty Smooth x Wheeling Peppy). The ranch’s owner, Penelope P. Knight, bought TM Quiver and the accompanying recipient mare-in-foal at the Buffalo Ranch dispersal sale in Fort Worth, Texas, last October. It was a \$67,000 investment, a valuable and exciting addition to the Coyote Rock breeding program.

But disaster struck when, an hour or so after foaling, Texas pushed her uterus completely out of her body. Uterine prolapse, though rare in horses, comes with a grim prognosis. Hagerty had never before seen a mare in this condition, but instantly knew she had a dire emergency on her hands. Happiness evaporated as she reached for the phone.

Desperate measures

The mare with the best shot at surviving a prolapse is the one that stays calm enough to let her handlers protect the uterus from irreparable damage.

Texas was not that mare.

“She was a typical recipient mare. I don’t think she had a lot of handling,” Hagerty said. “She was easy to catch, but she was nervous all the time. I think she’d had a lot of babies.”

In a heartbreaking display of maternal instinct, despite her pain, the mare struggled to protect her newborn and encourage it to nurse.

“She would lay down, and then the baby would move, and she would get up, and of course what she was also doing was tearing up her uterus. I knew, before the vet came, that there was no way it would be able to be put back in. There was too much damage,” Hagerty said.

Hagerty and foaling assistant Luke Neathery, who slept in the barn and was the first one to assist Texas as she went into labor, waited for a seemingly eternal 30 minutes. Finally, Coyote Rock’s attending veterinarian, Dr. Trish Kentner of Countryside Equine Clinic, Bend, Ore., arrived. Uterine prolapse in mares is so uncommon that in 20 years of equine reproductive work, Kentner



(Above) Lady Di and her adopted Hydrive Cat foal enjoy the spring sunshine at Coyote Rock Ranch. (Right) Hormone treatment helped Lady Di produce enough milk to feed the filly.—

Photos by Dennis Taylor

had seen maybe two or three other cases. She had a bad feeling about this one.

"The mare's uterus was totally everted. Both horns were out, and so was the uterine body, plus it was lacerated in several areas. Her uterine arteries – she was basically bleeding to death," Kentner said.

Time was running out, but if Kentner could stop the hemorrhage and perform an emergency hysterectomy, there was a glimmer of hope that Texas might live to raise the foal.

"We wanted her to have her best shot," Hagerty said. "She wasn't an easy mare to be around, but to see that maternal instinct, while she was dying – she earned the right to try."

As the mare fought to stay near her newborn, Hagerty helped Kentner restrain and anesthetize her. There was a good chance Texas would die during the procedure, Kentner warned.

"That's exactly what happened. Trish was working a mile a minute, and I was at the mare's head, keeping an eye on her. We had her head under a towel. At one point, I looked at her and said, 'Trish, I think she's gone.' And she was," Hagerty said.

Even in death, Texas provided her baby with nutrient- and antibody-rich colostrum as Kentner and Hagerty used a syringe as a makeshift breast pump, drawing out all the milk they could. But that only met the filly's immediate need. Hagerty faced the daunting, long-term task of raising an orphan.

"It just felt like an impending disaster. The loss of the mare was so tragic, and now I had a baby on my hands that had no mom. I did not

want to bottle-feed it for the next six months and create a pet, rather than a performance horse. We all know what orphans are like. They're pushy, obnoxious, spoiled and they don't get socialized in the same manner as normal foals," Hagerty said.

At Kentner's suggestion, Hagerty called Blue Ribbon Farm, a Buckley, Wash., Thoroughbred facility that provides nurse mares. A substitute mother would be available, but not for five days. The Hydrive Cat filly needed a mom right now, so the foster search turned to Coyote Rock Ranch's own

mare population.

"We can now bring mares into milk by giving them a combination of hormones," Kentner explained. "I asked if they had any open mares that have had a baby before."

In that instant, Hagerty had an idea.

"I immediately thought of Lady Di," she said.

Maternal miracle

Twenty-two year old Catalyst Lady Di (Taris Catalyst x Docs Manta x Doc Bar), came to Coyote Rock in 2005. In her younger days, she earned a few American Quarter Horse Association reining points, and then produced 12 babies from 1996 through 2009. She was aging, and a challenge to foal out, so Lady Di

Preparing for the Worst

According to Trish Kentner, DVM, Bend, Ore., there are a number of causes for uterine prolapse in a mare, including forcible placenta removal, excessive straining by the mare, or a complicated delivery in which the foal punctures the uterus and drags it along as it's born.

Prolapses happen so infrequently in mares that even an experienced breeding manager may go a whole career without seeing one, she said.

"It's not something I get people really worked up about. It's a pretty rare complication," Kentner said. "One thing to warn people about – don't try to remove the placenta by themselves."

Whatever the cause, a prolapse is a serious emergency requiring immediate veterinary attention. In the meantime, the mare should be kept as calm as possible, and the uterus protected from dirt and injury. Put a garbage bag over it and hold it up, because the more gravity pulls on it, the more it is likely to bleed, Kentner said.

On the topic of orphaned foals, Kentner said it is worth some extra effort to graft a baby onto a nurse mare, even if she's crabby at first.

"You'll get mares that reject the foal, and I always encourage people to take the time to work with those, because most of the time, they'll accept them. I've had people where the mare kicks the foal, and then they separate them and are done. Spending a couple of sleepless nights usually will pay off in the end, but it takes a lot of dedication and hard work." —SD



The recipient mare that died was carrying the filly for TM Quiver (Smart Little Ricochet x Shes Pretty Smooth x Wheeling Peppy), a 1999 half-sister to Smooth As A Cat, who earned \$151,564 in her show career. Bred by Tommy Manion Inc., she was purchased by Phil and Mary Ann Rapp in 2003. TM Quiver is pictured here with Mary Ann Rapp, earning the 5/6 Year Old Reserve Championship at The Non-Pro. She changed hands in 2005, becoming an SDP Buffalo Ranch broodmare until the ranch's dispersal sale last October, where she was purchased by Coyote Rock Ranch. —Photo by Jamie Littlefield

retired from broodmare duty last year – and seemed quite displeased about it.

“She was really mad at me. I know it sounds funny, but she just has always really loved having a baby by her side. I thought Lady Di might be a perfect option for this baby.”

Nurse mare relationships often start in rocky fashion, so Hagerty and Kentner proceeded cautiously.

“I’ve tried with mares that have lost foals, and they’ve got big bags, and it’s still a battle. You’re tying up legs, and drugging them or twitching them, and you have to be there 24 hours a day before they finally accept the new foal two or three days down the road,” Kentner said.

Hagerty led the old mare into the stall adjacent to the filly, keeping the two safely separated during the first careful introduction.

“Lady Di was in that stall, I would guess, a maximum of 20 seconds when she peered over the divider and saw that baby for the first time. Those ears perked up and the nickers started. Trish and I looked at each other and she said, ‘Bring that mare in here right now,’” Hagerty said.

No one could believe what happened next.

“It was incredible,” Kentner said. “I have never seen anything like it in 20 years. I just

sat there with my mouth open. It was like, all of a sudden, that was her baby.”

Carefully, the women let the old mare and the new foal smell each other, ready to intervene as the little filly head-butted Lady Di, looking for milk. At this point, another mare would likely have pinned her ears and showed the strange baby her heels or teeth.

“She did nothing. She didn’t flatten an ear, she didn’t move, she didn’t kick, she didn’t do anything except start nickering when the baby got too far away from her. This was in the course of, like, three minutes. Trish said ‘I think you can let her go.’ We were both kind of in shock. There was not an instant that Lady Di did not believe that baby was hers, from the moment she saw it,” Hagerty said. “I’ve got a dead horse in one stall, and across the alley, I’ve got this mare and foal, bonding. It was like, all of a sudden, one door shut and another opened.”

Mother’s milk

The bond was instant and unbreakable, but there was another hurdle – getting Lady Di to produce enough milk. Amazingly, the retired mare, who had not had a foal for two years, came in from the pasture with a little milk already in her udder. Kentner immedi-

ately started Lady Di the mare on Regu-Mate (altrenogest) and Equidone (domperidone), a hormone combination that stimulates lactation. The physical act of the foal nursing also speeds the process, although it can aggravate the mare.

“That’s what I was afraid of, that the foal would make her sore and she would get irritated,” Kentner said. But Lady Di’s mothering was beyond reproach. “She let that foal nurse as long as it wanted and never got irritated or acted like she was going to kick her or anything like that.”

Until Lady Di was in full milk production, Hagerty stopped the nursing after 15 minutes, and finished the feeding with milk replacer and a syringe. Positioning Lady Di between herself and the filly, Hagerty held the syringe beside Lady Di’s udder while the foal drank, a process the old mare caught on to immediately.

“When we first did the feeding we had a halter on Lady Di. Never after that day did I have to halter the mare to feed the baby. You’d open the stall door, and Lady Di would essentially ‘assume the position.’ She knew exactly where to be. She’d come between me and the baby, and she’d just stand there while I fed the baby. She never moved an inch,” Hagerty said. “This mare, she’s just an absolute miracle. I have brand new appreciation for her. She thought her life was good before – she’s got lots more good things coming.”

For the first week, until Lady Di developed a full udder, Hagerty and the Coyote Rock team fed the baby every 30 minutes. Gradually, the time between hand-feedings lengthened to an hour, then two, three, and four.

“The time commitment was huge for this, but well worth it,” Hagerty said.

It took several weeks, but now the filly only relies on humans for a twice-daily supplement, to compensate for what Kentner describes as a slight nutritional deficiency in the mare’s hormone-induced milk. Otherwise, the mother-daughter relationship is no different than if Lady Di had foaled the baby herself.

“The biggest thing Di has ever done in her life is what she’s doing right now,” Hagerty said. “She’s invaluable. She’s worth her weight in gold.”

And while the matronly mare found it perfectly natural to adopt an orphan as her own without hesitation, the humans in attendance did not take the experience lightly.

“It was just a miracle,” Kentner said. “It was one of those experiences in life where you go, ‘That’s one to put down in the books and remember.’ It was awful, it was bloody, and then we’re like, ‘OK, now we’ve got to save this baby.’ We were just incredibly depressed, and then you see this miracle happening.” ★