



'Tell a Gelding, and Ask a Mare'...When Mares Behave Like Bears

By Michelle Twilla, DVM

It seems that a very small portion of horse owners truly love mares while the majority would prefer to never have a mare in their barn. Poor behavior or training challenges when dealing with a mare are often blamed on their reproductive anatomy and hormones.

If you own a mare then you may be interested in learning how we can manage the mares reproductive cycle when it poses a challenge such as during a performance-show/event or when you should seek veterinary advice because there may be a more serious medical condition that needs consideration.

Mares are classified as long day, seasonal, polyestrous breeders. To clarify, this means that they are reproductively active with fertile cycles when the day length is long (April to September) and they have multiple estrous cycles (every 18-21 days) during the breeding season. Conversely, mares have a period of anestrus or reproductive inactivity during the short day (November – February). During this time they do not have an estrous cycle. In the interims are periods of transition the 'cycles' that occur during transition are not 'fertile' however the mare may behave as though in heat or in estrus and occasionally the signs can be exaggerated. The period of estrus or heat usually lasts five to seven days. The rising levels of estrogen are responsible for behavioral signs such as tail lifting, frequent urination, 'winking' of the vulva all meant to display receptivity to a stallion. On occasion the signs can be more disruptive such as stamping, kicking and squealing/vocalization. This occurs until the mare ovulates after which progesterone becomes the dominant hormone produced and the signs of 'heat' disappear. The majority of mares change very little when they come into heat however there are those that behave unpredictably that make them a challenge to train constructively.

It appears that a mare's ovaries are blamed too frequently or too readily when faced with training/behavior issues. This is not to say that it is not a possibility but more importantly it is the responsibility of the horse owner to rule out other possible sources such as lameness, illness, or injury. Medical conditions such as pneumo-vagina, vaginitis, and bladder infections can result in signs that mimic a mare in heat yet will require treatment by your veterinarian to resolve.

One of the first steps you can take is to start a journal or calendar to document when the adverse behavior occurs. This document will be helpful to your veterinarian when determining if there is a correlation between the adverse behavior and a phase of the mare's estrous cycle. Hormone testing, palpation and ultrasound can be used to determine what phase of the estrous cycle your mare is in.

Ovarian tumors do occur in mares. For example, granulosa cell tumors result in aggressive or 'stud like' behavior in mares. Affected mares may appear to always remain in heat or conversely may seem to never cycle. This would be an instance where evaluation and examination by your veterinarian is crucial. These tumors are diagnosed via rectal palpation, ultrasound and hormonal testing. Treatment involves surgical removal of the affected ovary.

Prescription hormonal therapy is an option for controlling the timing of the heat cycles. This practice is commonly used when synchronizing for breeding management purposes. The majority of these methods do not have an adverse affect on the mare's future fertility. However they should only be used under the recommendations and guidance of your veterinarian.

Many over the counter herbal supplements are available for controlling moody mares. These supplements will not prevent your mare from cycling but they may be calming. These products lack scientific research demonstrating their effectiveness however there are anecdotal positive reports of their use. Not all mares may respond and horse owners should pay attention to the ingredients, as some are restricted from FEI events.

Contact Brandon Equine Medical Center at 813-643-7177 or email info@brandonequine.com with any questions regarding this topic.

This article originally appeared in Horse & Pony magazine in November 2014 and is reprinted here with their permission.