



The Days in the Life of Our **Weanlings** – Key Ingredient is **Trust** Behind the Scenes of DeGraff Stables at Liberty Farm

Spring has finally come (although the snow in some places may disagree) and what better time to talk about babies? Robin DeGraff of Liberty Farms and DeGraff Stables has been sharing the world of breeding beyond just a mare and stallion, with our readers. She has given us an insider's view of the ins and outs of stallion selection, genetics throughout the generations, mare care, and how the broodmare is just as important (if not more so!) as the stallion.

*By Robin DeGraff, Jenna McGrath,
and Gabrielle Sasse*



In April, Robin and her assistant Jenna McGrath, delve into the world of foals and weanlings:

“Our goals are simple,” begins DeGraff. “Through careful mating selections we strive to breed the absolute best quality athletes possible. As these foals are born, we believe that everything we do with them lays the foundation for the rest of their lives. Our aim is to have each foal be healthy, well adjusted to people, well adjusted to its environment and willing to please its next owner.”

As the health and nutrition of the foal actually began with the care, proper feeding and vaccination of the mare, we eagerly welcome the new arrival at foaling time. Farm manager James Skipper ensures that each mare is properly vaccinated and medicated, as well as overseeing the entire process. Staff attends to each foaling, and our post foaling routine includes bottle-feeding colostrum (the mare’s first milk) in order to quantify and insure adequate consumption. Foaling also includes administration of an antibody to ward off deadly E.coli bacteria and of a whole egg protein complex that helps prevent or reduce neonatal foal diarrhea. Just as importantly, even though the foal may look and act healthy, we pull blood approximately 12 hours after birth and run a CBC to confirm that all counts are WNL or “within normal limits,” and that the IgG level (immunoglobins) is satisfactory. If levels are not satisfactory, we take appropriate actions with our veterinarian to remedy the situation.



“What a fun time foaling is!” exclaims Jenna.

“The foal is born, and it is exciting to introduce them to the world! Everything is new and interesting to them, and we watch them as they explore their environment.” The foals are monitored closely each day and turnouts begin the first week for the mare and foal, weather permitting, as exercise is critical. The babies are haltered and led alongside their dam. This is no small commitment, as two handlers are required to turn the pair out, and again to bring them in. We start with a half-day turnout and graduate to full-day turnouts. “The catching and leading in and out of the stall is a great way to make sure that they are interacted

with a minimum of twice each day,” explains Jenna. “This lays the foundation for their future; learning that they can trust their handler.” It is important to be quiet and to move slowly with them.

“Think about it,” Jenna continues. “Each time you go into the stall, you teach them to look forward to your visit or to be ‘wary’ of your visit. With a daily routine where they must be caught and haltered, and where they must walk with the handler, it teaches them that they are not just free to do as they please and they learn to respect their handler. We like to keep with little, short lessons each day and build from there.”





Jenna furthers her explanation of the routine: “Daily handling continues through the foal’s first 30-45 days, usually the amount of time that it takes to get their dam bred back and is confirmed in foal with a fetus heartbeat. At that time, the mares and foals are separated off into paddocks or pastures according to their age, size and/or temperaments of their dams. At this time they pretty much have things their own way for a few months. We feed three times a day, approximately every eight hours, so all are seen multiple times on a daily basis. They are brought in for their routine health care; deworming, farrier, vaccinations, monthly chest scans or the dam’s reproductive needs and health care. On these days, the foals are haltered, led, stalled and then sent back out to grow.” Robin adds, “We LOVE that we have the land and the paddock splits at our farm in order to properly separate and maintain a healthy outdoor lifestyle for them. We find our foals are so much healthier when they are not stalled.”



Finally, weaning time arrives! Robin continues, “We try to make this process as painless as possible. Based on age, we pull 2-6 foals at a time from the pasture and stall them together, either in pairs or threesomes in our large foaling stalls. Their dams are then relocated to paddocks and their calorie intake is reduced in order to help them dry their milk supply.”

DeGraff’s young-horse specialist, Jenna McGrath states, “the first thing we reinforce after weaning is the importance of giving in to pressure. Leading is necessary to bring them in and out of the field. They must also stand within the region of anyone who is trying to work on them, while also respecting each other’s space.”



The foals live in stalls for the first week after weaning, in order to be worked with on their own, without their mother, and get used to one-on-one human contact. “Letting them learn to like you makes it easier when you want to retrieve them from the field,” Jenna reinforces. “I have noticed after working with six foal crops that trust is very important, so to establish that immediately eliminates many handling issues down the road.”

Jenna continues, “When the foals are weaned, they wear lead ropes in the stall in order to start the pressure/release learning process. They are introduced to our very talented ‘necking donkeys’ that they work with for a couple hours each day.” DeGraff Stables has their Farm Manager James Skipper managing the foals in respect to hooking them to the donkeys and teaching them to tie. It is a common training practice to attach a weanling to a donkey by a halter to the horse, and a rope attaching it to an apparatus around the donkey’s neck. When done correctly, the process will not harm either animal and is quite useful as a training tool. “A good necking donkey is priceless in our operation! They are wonderful tools because they have an infinite amount of time and nowhere to be, so we have incorporated their use extensively in our program.” Jenna elaborates, “We have a great many things to manage in a day, and we find that the donkeys help provide individual attention by spending the hours per day with the foals while we complete our other chores.”





Filly by DGS IndyGo, owned by Bruce Brown, and Big Mike, the donkey. The video was taken at Bruce's Lakeside Arena.

“Our donkeys teach the weanlings that they no longer have a say in what they do each day, without us humans having to be ‘the bad guys.’ The donkey will decide if the colt deserves to relax and is allowed to eat hay based on how the foal reacts to the donkey. If the foal is quiet, the donkeys are patient enough to stand with the foal for hours.” A necking donkey’s natural reaction to being hooked to a weanling will be to walk circles when the weanling is not behaving appropriately; eventually tiring them out; thereby reprimanding it without human intervention.

“In our experience, the best necking donkey for a weanling is one that is not super aggressive,” James adds. “We do not want

to scare the weanling the first time being hooked up. We start the process of introducing the foal to the donkey in a stall for a few hours each day and they are maintained in this smaller enclosure until the weanling seems comfortable and understands the donkeys program. We graduate them to a larger space, such as a round pen, for a period of time and after that we turn them out together in a small paddock.”

Hooking a foal to a necking donkey should always be done in a situation where they can be checked on every 10-15 minutes, because accidents may arise with hooking two animals together. “The most common situation we incur is to find that the weanling has a leg over top of the necking apparatus,” James states. “The necking apparatus is usually a western girth with a bull snap connected to a quick release link that is connected to a bull snap. The less slack there is, the less of a chance for them to get tangled up.” He continues, “Most foals do not overreact and nothing ever happens. If they do get a leg over, the most common injury I

have seen from this is just a little hair burnt off the inside of a front leg. However, I cannot stress enough how you should always have a sharp pocket knife in case you need to cut a halter.”

“If you have a really bad colt, it is best to keep them for an extended period of time in the smaller, more confined space,” James stresses. “There is a lower chance of injury if they have less room to resist the pressure. For these foals, it is best to start out with a quieter donkey but then progress to a more assertive donkey before moving to a larger space. If necessary, we will hook a donkey to the colt in the morning, give them a lunch break, and then move to a fresh donkey in the afternoon. We do not ever leave them hooked together unsupervised overnight. Remember it is better to be extra cautious about being ready for the next step than overly eager. Time and patience goes a long way in building trust.” In reality, the key to successful handling of weanlings is to gain their trust. To do this, you must have patience!



Once the weanlings have started the donkey process, they are ready to have their leads held on to and will respect your lead rope. Remember to always use gloves when leading a young horse, in the event that they jump or spook. It will not only save your hands, but they will be less likely to get away. The lessons from the donkey teach the foals they must respect their halter and the pressure. You don't want to go backwards because of losing a lead rope! James and Jenna work together to ensure that the weanlings have a smooth learning process, and that the weanlings progress each day.

"I usually begin by just standing there and petting them, reassuring them I am not there to administer a dewormer or a vaccination," Jenna begins. "Since they have now been away from their mothers a few days, they really enjoy a good scratching. They





are looking for a 'buddy.' In general, I am extremely kind to them; I hook their halter to a lead and always have them in-hand, and I usually work in a small space at first, such as a stall, so that I have plenty of opportunity for control in a safe environment. We have a ring on the wall, above their head, which we will run the rope lead through to simulate tying, but do not hook them yet. This keeps their head up while grooming, scratching, toweling off...anything to get them used to our hands."

"There are unacceptable behaviors such as striking, biting, rearing, and kicking," Jenna continues. "In the event that this happens, we are low key and will firmly shank them, unless additional action is required. Most

bad behaviors resolve quickest when you do not let them get away with anything in a quiet, patient and non-aggressive manner. It has been determined by equine behaviorists that you have approximately 8 seconds to make a correction in order for the horse to associate the correction with the behavior. When correcting I have three words: make it count. If the correction is memorable...not abusive...but memorable, you will be less likely to have to nag at them. Think of them as kids. If you are at the store with your kids and one is poking the other, would it work better if you threatened a consequence (repeatedly) or if you took the time to directly put them in a time out? It may take a few times, but they will eventually 'get it.'"



DeGraff's priorities are most focused on rewards for good behavior. When added to consequence for bad behavior, there develops a significant circumstance for reward. "I do not use food as a reward," Jenna states. "Horses are just as happy with a good scratching or rubbing and kind words of praise, as they are with food. I believe you should always correct immediately, but that means you should also immediately reward them the first chance they do something right. A good example is when I am teaching a horse to lead and 'whoa'. I begin by using both a chain lead over their nose and a rope lead hooked to the bottom of the halter. This way, I can determine how much control I need. Because of the donkeys, they

"Each of our foals is different," Jenna elaborates...

usually understand the 'forward' very well, but the donkeys don't speak English, so 'whoa' really does not mean much to them at this point. To begin, I start in the barn aisle with the doors closed. There is less distraction and it makes it easier for them to concentrate on me. We walk, and I say 'whoa', I count to two and stop my feet. If they do not stop with me, I will back them hard off the chain two to four steps and stop. I then reward them for the stop."

"Each of our foals is different," Jenna elaborates, "so to me, working with weanlings is all about the feel, the consistency and the energy you put off towards them. Same as in a herd: some weanlings are passive, some are aggressive. If one is going to charge ahead belligerently while I am trying to teach them stop to the word 'whoa', my back up needs to be as assertive as the colt was aggressive. As a handler, my actions must be assertive; not aggressive. Assertion comes from a place of patience, power, and confidence; aggression comes from a place of anger, frustration, and fear. Additionally, to teach the foal to stop to the word 'whoa', it is not just the sound of the word. It is everything I do to 'set up' to say the word. The consistency of when I say 'whoa' and when I stop my feet is important, because it gives them a set outline of what is to be expected. It is not short and abrupt, which does not give them time to interpret and react, and, it is not drawn out to long for the command not to take effect."

"Everything we want to train the foal to do, we approach in this manner," says Jenna. "Many of the lessons the foal needs to learn have already been taught by the donkeys, such as respect, leading, tying and patience. We now have to encourage them to learn to equate their donkey lessons to humans. For example, the necking donkeys have made tying a very easy task to learn. However, before the weanlings are left hooked to the wall alone, we simulate the wall tie by feeding a lead rope through it and holding it in hand while grooming. They are asked to move back and forth against the 'tie'. This gives us the opportunity to gauge their reaction; if they stand quietly and don't pull back, it identifies to us that they are ready to begin being left tied to the wall for 10-15 minutes at a time. For safety's sake we always use quick release snaps on our ties, and many times, it has come in handy."

Throughout the foal's weanling year, they have many lessons to learn in order to prepare to be useful individuals later in life. Leading, tying, grooming, pulling and banding manes, picking up their feet, clipping, bathing and loading into both a ramp and a step-up trailer are among some of the things the staff at DeGraff Stables does with the babies. Farm Manager James not only manages weanling learning time and helps in the learning process, but he also administers all vaccinations, dewormings, schedules farrier and vet procedures and administers any necessary medicines. "James and Jenna both work together superbly," shares Robin.



“Having them teamed up together makes for well rounded weanlings that can be successful in their new homes.”

Keeping in mind that horses are herd animals is important when you begin to start weaning them away from their buddies, so that they achieve confidence to be alone, or alone with their handler. “We try to keep this stress-free also,” Jenna explains. “Fortunately, our farm is set up with multiple barns and paddocks. This affords us the opportunity to load and trailer them back and forth and to get them used to moving from one stall/barn to another. They are exposed

to several different outdoor work areas and learn that they can move around and it is not ‘scary’. We work with them in pairs at first, and continue later in the year as individuals. All of this helps the horses develop their self-assurance. They learn that the handler is their friend and look forward to their time spent with the person.”

“Daily, we remember that every horse is different,” says Jenna, “and every time we introduce something new, we find that some take only a couple days to ‘get it,’ and for others it could be a week or two. In our opinions, it is safer to remain with the basics longer than it is to be in a hurry.”

Jenna concludes, “We also find that our horses are much healthier living outdoors. Really, the barns are only a convenience to us humans. So, once they start confidently approaching us in the stall and in the small paddock(s), they are ready to go out and be horses in the field. Our goal is a well-adjusted individual that will serve their new owner with respect so that they may develop a long-lasting friendship. The colt’s first impression of anything new to do, is a lasting one, so it is better to not make an impression at all than make one you’ll regret. Instilling trust in us people, in everything we do with them, helps set the building blocks for future lessons as they mature and prepares them for their next owner.”

Thanks to Robin, Jenna and James for sharing their important steps in preparing a foal for its new journey in life! Stay tuned in future issues as these two describe DeGraff Stables’ steps in further fitting horses for their new homes.

Please visit www.DeGraffStables.com for the latest in information regarding all stallions: **DGS IndyGo, DGS Vestastic, Frosty The Goodbar, HBF Iron Man, Hes A Cool Hotrod, Hot Lopin Sensation, Indian Artifacts, Invite The Artist** and **PR Tells A Tale**. Flyers, contracts, breeding fees, discounts and the ability to book and pay on-line are all available. The www.WhatWork4.com website has detailed stallion information, offspring photos, and offspring for sale information for the DeGraff Stables owned horses: **DGS IndyGo, DGS Vestastic, Indian Artifacts** and **HBF Iron Man** (co-owned). Visit often for deals and the latest updates!



JAMES SKIPPER

DeGraff Stables is blessed to have a special individual working alongside them at Liberty Farm in Midway Kentucky in James Skipper, the farm manager. “James wears many hats for us and thankfully he wears them all exceptionally well,” shares Robin. “An operation this size requires an excellent all-around horseman to manage the health, nutrition and exercise for the stallions plus critical collection schedules, along with managing the reproduction requirements of a full broodmare band, foaling, rebreeding the mares and managing the growth, training and fitting of the foals from birth through their under saddle or show days. Farm, equipment and pasture maintenance is also a must for any successful opera-

tion. We are fortunate to have these requirements met in one neat package; James Skipper.”

James was managing Liberty Farm, at that time a Thoroughbred operation, in Midway, Kentucky when the DeGraff Stables LLC group purchased the 127 acre facility in October of 2007. James’ extensive resume fit our needs precisely. He literally had foaled thousands of foals in his lifetime and had managed a stallion station that stood 14-16 stallions at a time; along with annually sales prepping 300 plus yearlings a year. He has been involved with running quarter horses, thoroughbreds and now pleasure and performance horses. With over 30 years expe-





rience in the horse industry and working on farms he boasts just a couple locations, each with a long tenure; Ridgely Farm in Purcell, OK and the Lazy E in Guthrie, OK. Moving to Kentucky in 2001, he worked for Guardia Farms (formerly Stonewall) and Gentry Farms, both running Quarter Horse and Thoroughbred racing operations, until he took the job at Liberty Farm.

He is from Washington, Oklahoma and is married and lives with his wife Pam on the farm. James has three children of his own, plus they have adopted four young children through the Kentucky State Foster Care program. James is a Deacon at the Glen Creek Baptist Church and is heavily relied upon by the members of the Church. Pam teaches grades 3-6 in their Sunday School.

JENNA MCGRATH

Jenna grew up in Strongsville, Ohio where her love for horses developed early. “My childhood babysitter, Norma Seidel introduced me to horses at age three and it has been love ever since,” says Jenna. As a youth, she showed Paints and Appaloosas focusing on Hunter Under Saddle, Hunt Seat Equitation, and Showmanship. “Early in my youth career, I was lucky enough to be reserve in the state of Ohio in 14-18 Hunter Under Saddle and Senior Hunter Under Saddle. I have received top ten honors in Hunter Under Saddle and Hunter in Hand at the APHC youth world show at the end of my youth career,” she shares.

Jenna studied Small Business Management and Entrepreneurship at Cuyahoga Community College starting as a Junior in high school to be able to be more available to pursue her love of riding and showing. After completing her Associates, she transferred to the University of Findlay to study Equine Science with a focus in English riding. “Only three weeks in one of my trainers, Michelle Ooley-Arnold, told me about a woman looking for help getting young horses ready for a photo shoot. She stated it was a quarter horse breeder and thought I would be interested after having a history in pleasure horses. Little did I know it was Robin DeGraff and Indian Artifacts!” Jenna exclaims. “I have admired Indian Artifacts





with great intensity since I first saw him on Stallion Avenue at the All American Quarter Horse Congress as a little girl. After the photoshoot was done, I immediately insisted that I was available certain days of the week and I was coming to help her. She accepted!"

Jenna continues "That spring we moved to Kentucky, where I learned the ins and outs of equine reproduction and herd management. I continued to study Equine Business Management at the University of Kentucky. I expressed interest in wanting to go on and get Robin's young horses started. She was very encouraging. She then sent me to Lakeside Arena to work with Bruce Brown on colt starting, and later on Rick and Heidi

Cecil to continue my education. She has provided me with amazing experience after amazing experience. The latest and greatest being getting to show for the first time at the All American Quarter Horse Congress in the Yearling English Lunge Line and the Open Three yr old Hunter Under Saddle Futurity. It was wonderful to be able to bring along horses that we had raised from birth and then see them shine in the show ring."

Most recently, Jenna was able to go to Ocala, FL to work with Lynn Palm to further enhance her technique. "I was able to see and ride our up and coming stallion prospect In Dee Extreme, a 2007 18+ hand Indian Artifacts son. He is schooling first level dressage and was an amazing ride," Jenna explains.

Jenna finishes, "Robin has helped me cross things off my bucket list left and right, Jenna grew up in Strongsville, Ohio where her love for horses developed early. "My childhood babysitter, Norma Seidel introduced me to horses at age three and it has been love ever since," says Jenna. As a youth, she showed Paints and Appaloosas focusing on Hunter Under Saddle, Hunt Seat Equitation, and Showmanship. "Early in my youth career, I was lucky enough to be reserve in the state of Ohio in 14-18 Hunter Under Saddle and Senior Hunter Under Saddle. I have received top ten honors in Hunter Under Saddle and Hunter in Hand at the APhc youth world show at the end of my youth career," she shares.

Jenna studied Small Business Management and Entrepreneurship at Cuyahoga Community College starting as a Junior in high school to be able to be more available to pursue her love of riding and showing. After completing her Associates, she transferred to the University of Findlay to study Equine Science with a focus in English riding. "Only three weeks in one of my trainers, Michelle Ooley-Arnold, told me about a woman looking for help getting young horses ready for a photo shoot. She stated it was a quarter horse breeder and thought I would be interested after having a history in pleasure horses. Little did I know it was Robin DeGraff and Indian Artifacts!" Jenna exclaims. "I have admired Indian Artifacts with great intensity since I first saw him on Stallion Avenue at the All American Quarter Horse Congress as a little girl. After the photoshoot was done, I immediately

insisted that I was available certain days of the week and I was coming to help her. She accepted!"

Jenna continues "That spring we moved to Kentucky, where I learned the ins and outs of equine reproduction and herd management. I continued to study Equine Business Management at the University of Kentucky. I expressed interest in wanting to go on and get Robin's young horses started. She was very encouraging. She then sent me to Lakeside Arena to work with Bruce Brown on colt starting, and later on Rick and Heidi Cecil to continue my education. She has provided me with amazing experience after amazing experience. The latest and greatest being getting to show for the first time at the All American Quarter Horse Congress in the Yearling English Lunge Line and the Open Three yr old Hunter Under Saddle Futurity. It was wonderful to be able to bring along horses that we had raised from birth and then see them shine in the show ring."

Most recently, Jenna was able to go to Ocala, FL to work with Lynn Palm to further enhance her technique. "I was able to see and ride our up and coming stallion prospect In Dee Extreme, a 2007 18+ hand Indian Artifacts son. He is schooling first level dressage and was an amazing ride," Jenna explains.

Jenna finishes, "Robin has helped me cross things off my bucket list left and right, I am forever grateful for the opportunity."