

Advances in Diagnostics and Therapeutic Techniques in Breeding Behavior Disorders in Stallions



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KEYWORDS

• Stallion • Sexual behavior • Breeding disorders

INTRODUCTION

Despite the suboptimal aspects of domestic breeding conditions compared to the natural conditions under which their reproductive behavior evolved, most domestic stallions have little difficulty adapting to any number of various management and breeding programs. Most immediately respond adequately or quickly learn to safely abide the restraint and direction imposed by a human handler, and can usually adapt to changes of methods of breeding for semen collection, housing, handling, social, and other management conditions. For those that do not, the problems can range from inadequate or variable sexual interest and response to overenthusiastic or aggressive response beyond the ability of the handlers to safely direct and control.

INADEQUATE SEXUAL INTEREST AND AROUSAL

Slow-Starting Novice Breeders

One of the more common problems for stallions during first introduction to breeding is inadequate sexual interest or response. Some may seem interested but are slow to achieve and/or maintain an erection. Some seem confused or conflicted, and easily distracted by ordinary environmental sounds or activities or reactions of the mare. Some may initially seem interested but quickly lose interest. Some may achieve erection but then not proceed normally to mount, or may mount and seem confused about how to proceed.

Inherent temperament in regard to breeding style and stamina naturally varies among individuals, and this factor may account for the difficulties of some slow-starting novice breeders. In the case of inadequate sexual behavior, the more

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important factors likely contributing to inadequate response in the domestic environment are the numerous management, training, and breeding practices that tend to adversely affect normal expression of sexual behavior of stallions. For example, through the training and performance years, colts and young stallions are typically actively discouraged from expressing sexual interest and response. Although most stallions can quickly learn to distinguish breeding opportunities from performance or training, this experienced-based suppression of sexual behavior likely plays a considerable role in the inadequate response of many novice breeders. Similarly, many stallions are punished for exhibiting normal spontaneous erection and penile movements, often called masturbation. It has been shown that punishment of this normal frequent behavior adversely affects breeding behavior.¹ In addition, in natural herds, the behavior, endocrinology, and fertility of individual stallions is naturally affected by their bachelor or harem social status within the herd at any time.^{2,3} Certain stallions hold harem status with access to breeding of their harem mares, whereas other stallions, known as bachelor stallions, do not hold regular access to mares. Some bachelors gain access to breeding via the alternate breeding strategy and style known as sneak breeding. Modulation of reproductive function of stallions can occur under domestic conditions and so is another important factor in instances of inadequate sexual interest and response in domestic breeding environments.

Another consideration is the style and expertise of the handling for breeding to which the stallion is exposed. Stallion behavior can be considerably influenced, positively or negatively, by the skill and style of mare and stallion handling for breeding. In addition, certain aspects of the physical facility where breeding is done can seem to affect mare and stallion behavior positively or negatively.

Regardless of these and other potential factors, most slow-starting stallions respond well with simple management and handling changes, as opposed to more complicated behavior modification regimens or pharmacologic therapies. The general approach is to try to identify and address any contributing factors. The following is a list of recommended considerations for assisting a slow-starting novice breeder:

1. Evaluate and address any potential discomfort or health problems that may be contributing to a stallion's insecurity in the breeding situation.
2. House and breed away from any other stallions.
3. Provide generous exposure to mares, as continuously and directly as safely possible.
4. For breeding stimulus or mount mares, provide those that seem to be most stimulating to the particular stallion. Almost all stallions show greater interest and respond more vigorously to intact mares compared with ovariectomized mares, regardless of their receptivity. The response is also usually greater for mares that are cycling naturally, as opposed to those that have been exposed to cycle manipulation or ovulation-induction agents. For many stallions, response tends to be greater with mares closer to ovulation as opposed to early estrus. Avoid washing the perineum or wrapping the tail. These may alter the natural visual and olfactory stimuli. Avoid odors of other stallions that may be intimidating to a low-confidence stallion, for example, from test mounting. Minimal restraint will allow the mare to show the natural estrus postures and movements that are generally most stimulating to stallions. **Fig. 1** illustrates the change from normal estrus to more aggressive type posture resulting from restraint. Breeding boots and hobbles can cause the mare to step in an unnatural gait that can startle stallions. **Fig. 2** illustrates the head-turned-back posture representing the natural mating invitation gesture of mares. Allowing and encouraging a stimulus mare to express this posture can immediately stimulate otherwise reluctant stallions.

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