



For some reason, Shawna Hobson's horse farm gets far more than its share of twins - the horse kind and the human kind.

Twins Are The Rule For Horses And Humans On This Farm

Shawna Hobson of Quincy, Washington has been raising horses for 32 years. During that time, she has had four sets of live twin foals born - in addition to having two sets of twin children herself!

Twins are considered rare in horses but for some uncanny reason, Hobson's operation gets far more than its share. In past years, she has always had at least one or two mares out of 10 conceive twins.

"Just this year, out of 25 mares bred, 10 of them conceived twins. Most commonly, what happens is that the mare will abort them, but we don't want that to happen because then you end up running an open mare," Hobson explains. "Instead, we have our vet do a rectal ultrasound at 17 days and again at 21 days to determine if twins exist. If they do, he pinches off the smallest one - it's like pinching off a grape - and the mare's body absorbs it."

Then, a week later, Hobson's vet comes back and does a third ultrasound to make sure that the remaining embryo wasn't disturbed. What makes Hobson's story even more unusual is that she's had her own two sets of twins (Shane and Seth, 21, and Stefanie and Steven, 17). She wouldn't change a thing as far as her family, but when it comes to horses she'd rather not have twin foals.

"It's just too hard. The babies come out too small, so they're weak and need a lot of extra attention. We don't even apply for breed registration papers for twins because they take a long time to mature, are usually stunted, and are of poorer quality than if they had been single foals. We give them away to 4-H kids instead," she explains.

The live twin foals that have been born on the Hobson ranch were ones that somehow slipped through the screening process and most weighed 35 to 40 lbs. at birth.

Many of Hobson's registered Paints are half Thoroughbred and it is thought by many

that Thoroughbreds are more likely to conceive twins.

However, equine veterinarian Carol Shwetz of Westlock, Alberta, Canada, says this could easily be a misconception because Thoroughbreds are also the horses that receive the most ultrasound examinations, due to their high value.

"It's possible that other breeds conceive just as many twins, but we just don't find out about them because they are re-absorbed or aborted," she says. "Belgians have the highest success rate in producing live twins, but it is still rare."

Shwetz quoted the following statistics from one of her veterinary reference books:

Out of every 1,000 bred mares that ovulate and conceive, 160 will conceive two eggs 150 of those (95 per cent) will lose or re-absorb those embryos at 40 to 45 days (before implantation)

Of the 10 remaining, six or seven will abort both foals or deliver them dead

Two or three will deliver one live foal

One will produce viable twins

Shwetz has no explanation for the high rate of twinning on the Hobson farm but says the trait can be genetic and that having a number of horses with similar bloodlines may increase the chances of twins.

But, of course, that doesn't explain why Hobson herself also had two sets of twins.

"Yeah, it's really strange why we've had so many twins on our ranch. It's something we don't understand, but we have a standing joke when people come to visit us," Hobson says. "We tell them, 'Don't drink the water.'"

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A Red Angus cow near Swift Current, Sask., recently gave birth to her second set of live quadruplets in as many years. All four survived.

Cow Produces Quadruplets Two Years in A Row

A four-year-old Red Angus cow near Swift Current, Saskatchewan seems to have more than her fair share of fertility. She has produced 10 calves in three years.

According to Scotty Hofer of the Ponteix Hutterite Colony, the cow gave birth in early February to her second set of live quadruplets in as many years. Both times, the prolific cow calved naturally, although she has received some assistance during the births. All eight calves have been in the 35 to 45-lb. range.

Hofer says the 1999 calves included three heifers and one bull. Two of them nursed from the mother, while the other two were hand-fed. One of the heifers died at three weeks but the others survived.

This year, the Colony opted to leave only one calf on the cow, put another on a foster cow, and hand-feed the remaining two. All four survived.

The prolific mother began her career two years ago by producing twins - something that now appears to have just been a warm up for what was to come. Both sets of quads were sired naturally by a Charolais bull. No fertility drugs were involved.

Quadruplets are rare and most are stillborn. University of Wisconsin professor and animal geneticist Dr. Brian Kirkpatrick says research has found that there are also environmental influences in multiple births, in addition to genetic tendencies.

"We know that the time of year when breeding occurs can affect the number of multiple births, in addition to genetic tendencies. We also suspect there is a nutritional component whereby high nutrition prior to and at the time of breeding can increase ovulation."

Kirkpatrick is working together with

cattlemen to establish a "breed registry" especially for cattle with highly prolific genetics.

"The registry will maintain records on the ancestry of animals as well as performance records. While most people don't look favorably on twinning because it can be a lot of extra trouble, there are people who desire this type of animal because of the increased profit potential. We have a mailing list of 65 cattlemen who are interested in increasing their twinning rate. So far, we know of 15 people who wish to participate in the registry and thereby become a potential source of seed stock."

For the past 20 years, twinning research has been going on at the USDA's Meat Animal Research Center at Clay Center, Nebraska. The center has established a herd of 300 cows that are genetically predisposed to twinning and the herd is currently achieving a 50 per cent twinning rate. The cows in this herd represent 12 different breeds.

The USDA has a production sale each year where they sell off excess stock produced by their prolific herd.

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