

Against All Odds

The Power of Will, the Gift of Grace

In the early dawn hours of January 31, Jo Carns sat in the office of her Quarter Horse breeding farm staring nervously at a television monitor. The screen showed a laboring mare circling a spacious stall, a scene familiar to most anyone who has bred a horse in the video age. However, this pregnancy was different – twins carried close to term and ready to be born.

“We saw her go down,” Jo said, “and I called Dr. Dennis Van Roekel (of Alva, FL) who had been on standby in anticipation of their arrival

for days. By the time he got here -- in about 30 minutes -- it was over.”

The minute King Leo Sue, a big-boned bay Quarter Horse, laid down in contractions, Jo and her trainer Jennah Blair raced back through the well-appointed barn to the stall where the mare had been sequestered for several months. Almost immediately, a little filly slipped out.

“Is she healthy, please let her be healthy,” Jo recalled saying to herself, Jennah and most importantly, to Sue. “And there she was, a little runty maybe, but breathing and responsive to her mom’s nudging and licking.”

Within minutes, Sue had new business. She moved across the stall, laid down, and effortlessly pushed out a colt, who was cloaked in the embryonic sac. Sue immediately returned to the filly, not seeming to realize what had happened. The ladies got the sac off the boy and brought him over to his mother and sister. It didn’t take a lot of encouragement for Sue to get with the program.

“Right from the beginning, Sue was an awesome mother to both of them,” said Jo. The thirteen-year-old brood mare had plenty of experience, these being her sixth and seventh foals. But to be able to carry them to term, produce enough milk, and tend to them equally is nothing short of miraculous.

Tex and Sue Make Two

All of the literature on twins seems to be negative. With today’s ultra-sound technology, twins detected early are usually reduced to a singleton birth by “pinching” or worse, starving the mare into a natural reduction. But this is most effective by catching them at the 18-day examination before the fetuses attach to the uterine wall. After that, it gets dangerous and often breeders opt to terminate the entire pregnancy and start over. But like the twin’s successful birth, the breeding of Sue to Docs Texas Hiredhand, a refined dark bay Quarter Horse, was unique.

Sue, the twin’s mother weighs in at 1,200 pounds a month after the twins were born.

“We pasture breed to certain stallions here,” explained Jo. “We thought Sue was successfully bred in 07 for an 08 baby, but she slipped that fetus without us knowing it.” One look at Sue’s big belly, shown here a month after the twins were born, confirmed how easily that could happen. They thought she was pregnant when she was turned out with Tex and the rest of the mares. But the pair rebred in secret and by the time a foal was never produced and the mare was examined, the ultrasound revealed Sue was sixty days along with twins.

“At that point, we were looking at a more complicated procedure to reduce or end the pregnancy,” said Jo. The odds of successful termination were iffy and a decision had to be made whether to trust Mother Nature or do what would seem more practical.

“Dr. Van Roekel explained that a good outcome on twins was really rare and not a good situation. He had only had two sets of twins survive in his 30 some years of practice. Still, I had no real concept for what we

decided to do in terms of the odds of survival. Not until it was almost foaling time, while doing Internet research, did I fully understand what I had put my heart into. That's when I learned the statistic for both twins surviving was one in 10,000! It was mind boggling. I was frozen with fear and at the same time, I was praying for the best. I always had a sixth sense that God was looking over these babies. They had a whole lot of people praying for the three of them in the last four months of gestation."

A Year of Expectation

As the months progressed, Sue grew to epic proportions, eventually packing 300 pounds onto her normally 1200 pound frame. Jo and her fiance Al Curry, who co-own Sweet Cypress Ranch, built her a double-sized maternity stall and she was brought in from the field in the Fall. Jo spent many a sleepless night in that stall with Sue, reading the literature on the internet about twins, none of it very encouraging.

"I would sit here with my laptop, looking at Sue growing more enormous by the minute, Filly Grace was born with a condition known as windswept legs. and pray," Jo said. "That one-in-10,000 figure stuck in my head. But I really thought we had a good shot at taking number one rather than 10,000. I had to think positive. And, Al has always been lucky. He says he was born lucky!"

When the twins were born and beat the odds, they were named Will and Grace -- Will for his tenacious and cocky personality and Grace "because it's only by the grace of God that she is here at all!"

Not Without Peril

While the twin's birth was uneventful, it wasn't without a hitch. Will was born sturdy and a healthy 70 pounds, which is pretty good for a three-week premature twin. But it seemed Grace got the leftovers in the womb and wasn't quite ready when she hit the ground. "She looked like ET because her ears were still pinned to the back of her head and she had a big bump in the forehead. She was funny looking, weighing just 55 pounds, and she didn't have enough time in the oven to get her legs finished," Jo said. "The last three weeks in utero, the cartilage and tendons finish developing. The bones are there, but they're not ready to support body weight."

Still, she was cute and demanding of life. From the beginning she was up more, nursed more, and made it known she was here to stay. At first, they did a lot of improvising to straighten out her legs, wrapping them with PVC splints to help them develop normally. But then a soft bulge formed in her right leg, diagnosed as a ruptured tendon. Jo feared that at best, Grace would never become more than a cherished pet. She was really worried what quality of life Grace would have.

Team Grace

In the womb, Grace was in the posterior position with her legs wound tightly around her body to the left. Will's forward or anterior position gave him more room and the lion's share of the nutrition flowing into the placenta. When they were born prematurely, Will was fine but Grace's legs didn't have enough time or the nutrients to completely develop. She was born "windswept," a condition in which both legs are bent in the same direction -- in Grace's case, to the left at the knees. Windswept can also occur in the hind legs, where the hocks are affected one way or another.

Being the disadvantaged twin probably accounts for what happened to Grace. However, windswept and other leg abnormalities also happen in singleton births, as genetics and nutrition both can play roles. Fortunately, many of these conditions resolve on their own or can be corrected by a knowledgeable vet who understands orthopedics. Unfortunately, instant euthanasia is too often the case, especially among volume breeders who don't have the time to wait and see, or who don't believe veterinary orthopedics can be effective in producing a sound performance horse.

Grace is well on her way to becoming just that, thanks to Jo's early splinting and the extensive treatment Grace is now receiving from Lake Worth, Florida's Dr. Ben Schachter, who specializes in equine orthopedics.

The first part of the treatment called for Grace's left leg to be put in a cast at three weeks old, to allow it to straighten out and strengthen over time. They tried removing it at about five weeks but within the next week the leg started bowing out again, so it was put back on at six weeks. At the same time the cast was first removed, Dr. Schachter operated on her right knee (five weeks) and also put an orthopedic glue on shoe on the right for additional support to help the leg begin to grow correctly. Screws were placed into the growth plate in Grace's knee to help her leg to begin to grow correctly.

"The surgery lasted over two hours," said Jo. "Dr. Schachter put two screws into the growth plate in the right knee and connected them by wire. This retards the growth plate so that the bones normalize in a short amount of time. In approximately three to four weeks, the screws will come back out and she will start being a normal baby with exercise in about a month. Up to this time, she has been on nearly total stall rest."

"During surgery, Jennah and I were nervous wrecks waiting outside with Will and Momma Sue for those long hours. Will is constantly concerned about his sister and watched the barn from his paddock for her return. You never heard so much whinnying when she came out of recovery. They are really 'joined at the hip'. Will would be lost without his older sister – after all, she was out first!"

"The surgery was quite costly, so we will have to continue our fund-raising to get to the finish line, which is clearly in sight. Dr. Ben continues to be encouraged by her recovery and response to the surgery." Grace under went surgery at just 5 weeks of age to straighten her right leg.

Still, the money flows -- outward. Between ultrasounds, X-rays, consultations, and materials, thousands of dollars have been spent to keep this filly beating the odds. Sweet Cypress Ranch lies just outside of the creeping sprawl of Fort Myers, Florida, where Jo and Al run the small Quarter horse operation. Their babies are well-pedigreed enough to be worth between \$1500 and \$3000, but what Grace needs will reach double over that upper price range. Team Grace grew spontaneously out of the publicity and word of mouth this story has had, and donations to her fund have been generous.

"Let me be clear, we're not a charity case or nonprofit organization. We are a successful business working through these tough economic times and don't have a lot left over to go to this extreme to save this baby," Jo said regarding Grace's care. "If it wasn't for all the generous donations and letters of encouragement, we could not be where we are today with Grace. Thank you all for your prayers and donations. I feel sure Grace knows the power that is behind her healing.

"The many veterinarians, friends and complete strangers have been so kind to work with us and help make this journey one to remember, not just for us but for many. They have touched so many lives."

The Twins Today

As of this writing, the twins are two months old. Sue is almost back down to her fighting weight, although that belly is probably there for good. Grace has packed on more than half of her birth body weight, now weighing in at 134 pounds and has so far, she has recovered well from the surgery. The hard cast came off and other than a leg wrap that will stay there for a few more weeks, she looks like any healthy baby. The legs are remarkably straight in just a short few weeks. Will is feisty, gorgeous and hard to forget. He now weighs 175 pounds.

Jo brings them out for some exercise and to tend to Grace's wrap. Will flips and bucks, and darts around the camera. He's a natural born show horse, perfect markings, great personality. Grace scoots around too, "like Forest Gump when he was in his braces. Go Forest!"

Sue and son are put in a corral so they can exercise while Team Grace checks on her needs and allows Grace

fresh air and sunshine. While she was in her cast, Jo and an assistant had to flip the little filly down onto her side, which took more and more effort every day. But as soon as they got her down, remarkably, Grace would doze off, relaxing completely at the hands of her caregivers.

"Grace is an old soul, I think," says Jo. "She's here to teach us something."

Both of the twins, Sue and everyone involved in this success story teach us something: the power of will and the gift of grace.