



Clydesdale-thoroughbred crosses make excellent foster mares



Showjumper 'Sir Clive' is out of a foster mare

## PLAYING MUM IN THE HUNTER

Editor-at-large **RENEE GEELLEN** looks at a unique foster mare facility in the Hunter Valley that is facing growing demand for its services.

**I**t's the end of July as I write this and the breeding industry is getting ready for another busy season. One of the many people anticipating a large workload is Lisa Randle at Hunter Nursing Nannies, the premier foster service for the Hunter Valley breeding industry.

Established in 2001, Hunter Nursing Nannies in Scone was developed to provide foster mothers to orphan foals and eliminate the crisis that occurs when a valuable broodmare dies or is unable to nurse her equally valuable foal. After the emergency call, Hunter Nursing Nannies puts one of their specialist foster mares on a truck along with her own foal and transports them to the orphan foal. The staff at Hunter Nursing Nannies perform the transition from orphan to fully fostered foal with the aim that the new combination of foster mare and orphan foal can be re-absorbed into the thoroughbred farm, and treated like the remainder of the mare/foal

**"Some thoroughbred broodmares are unable to raise their own foals for reasons including age or disease."**

combinations on the farm. Hunter Nursing Nannies then take the foster mare's own foal home and hand-raise it with a specially formulated milk replacer. These foals have been specifically bred for the sport horse market and are raised with a career in mind.

However it's not just a crisis business, with some clients pre-booking a foster mother for their unborn foals. Some thoroughbred broodmares are unable to raise their own foals. For example a mare that suffers from bad laminitis will be unable to raise her foal in a paddock situation and the use of a foster mare allows the foal a healthy outdoor upbringing where it can run free with mates building the required strength and muscle tone for its future athletic career. A broodmare that windsucks may be a good candidate for a foster situation, as it eliminates the chance that the thoroughbred mare will pass her unwanted habit onto her foal. An old valuable



Foals out of Lisa Randle's foster mares

mare is also a good candidate for the use of a foster mare, as this removes the foal from the old mare allowing her to recover and put her energy into producing another foal. Older mares also tend to have a lower quality of milk, and the use of a foster mare can give the foal a better start than its own mother.

The benefit of using a foster mare in these situations is that a marginal foal becomes a healthy foal, but it is a process that is not without responsibility or cost. There is a fee to cover the use of the mare, and the owner of the foal assumes responsibility for the proper care of the foster mare for around six months until the foal is weaned. The foster mare must come home to Hunter Nursing Nannies at the end of the hire period in the same condition as she left, i.e. properly fed and maintained, and most importantly she must come back in foal if at all possible.

Understandably, in order for her to be a foster mare in the following season, she needs to produce her own foal to kick-start the mothering process including milk production. Foal owners can use one of Hunter Nursing Nannies's own sport horse stallions under AI conditions or they can use a thoroughbred stallion if they have access to one. As the foals of the foster mares are bred for purpose, the choice of stallion is important in that the foal must be saleable as a sport horse. Standardbred stallions are not used by this service as their foals are too hard to sell in the sport horse market. This is mainly due to the different gaits they have compared to the gaits

required by sport horse enthusiasts.

Last season, a foster mare came home in foal to first season sire Haradasun. It is unusual for a mare to arrive home in foal to an expensive stallion, as they are usually too busy to cover non-thoroughbred mares, but in this case it was a good chance to give a young sire some practise early in the season. The foal is unlikely to be sold with the sire specifically noted, as the sport horse market is more interested in type and temperament.

The combination of clydesdale and thoroughbred as either half or three-quarter crosses is the best for both the production of foster mares and for sport horses. The combination brings the softness of temperament of the Clydesdale and the boldness of the thoroughbred, as well as the benefit of a reduced size from the pure clydesdale. It is the experience of Hunter Nursing Nannies that pure clydesdale mares are not always the best suited to being foster mothers, but it is not the mothering portion of their job that is the problem. The cross-bred mares are less timid than pure clydesdales and cope better in a thoroughbred stud environment both from a management point of view and also affiliation into the herd environment.

**T**he demand for the cross-bred foals is a growing market, and Hunter Nursing Nannies produces around 40 such foals each season. The foals have found homes as show horses, dressage, show jumpers and other sport disciplines. These foals have become so successful in these disciplines that Hunter Nursing Nannies is now getting repeat business from people who have previously purchased foals from them.

The peak for their business was in the season prior to EI where they fostered 70 foals. This dropped back to less than 40 during the EI crisis, as they were restricted in their ability to move mares and foals around. This season Hunter Nursing Nannies are anticipating approximately 60 foals that will require a foster mare. The ultimate goal of a thoroughbred foal is to perform as a racehorse, and there are plenty of successful racehorses that come through the fostering system. Leading this list in recent times is the Gr1 winner and now young sire, Northern Meteor. Here de Angels, an \$80,000 yearling and Gr1 placed racehorse is another to emerge from Hunter Nursing Nannies' foster system.

Hunter Nursing Nannies also run a colostrum bank for broodmares that operates as a halfway house system for broodmares that don't require the full foster service. Examples are mares that have had a haemolytic foal in previous seasons and thus cannot feed their own foals for the first 48 hours, or mares that run milk and have lost their own colostrum, or older mares with weak-

er colostrum. This is an effective, non-invasive way to get IGG levels up in a foal. The cross-bred foals that are hand-raised by Hunter Nursing Nannies for sale as sport horses are given a product called ePro Foal Starter Plus. This was developed by Meadowlands Animal Supplies in conjunction with Hunter Nursing Nannies as there was a need for a quality, affordable equine milk. Most people were feeding calf milk to their foals prior to the development of this product and this was causing ongoing problems in the foals as horses have quite different nutritional requirements to cows. This product is available through Hunter Nursing Nannies for thoroughbred foals that need more than their own mothers can give them.

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Fostering a foal can seem an expensive option, but the price needs to be weighed up against the stress of finding another thoroughbred mare in the opposite situation as your orphan foal and the ongoing stress of whether she will accept raising your foal. The ultimate aim in raising a thoroughbred athlete is getting a strong sales ring return and ultimately turning this into success on the racetrack. With this in mind, the cost involved in using a foster mare becomes minimal when the true champion emerges! Hunter Nursing Nannies is proud of the business that they have developed with a 100% success rate.



Gr1-winning sire Northern Meteor had a foster 'mum'