

Transported Semen...A New Hope for Our Breed's Future

On August 6, 2006, a very special filly was born in Minnesota. She is the first SMR eligible foal to be born that was conceived while her sire and dam were in two different states. She was conceived by semen shipped from my stallion, Cayuse Gold, in Virginia to a mare owned by Leslie Schwagel, Little Dove, in Minnesota. The filly is healthy and both mare and foal are doing very well.

Currently there are several Colonial Spanish stallions available for breeding via shipped semen and hopefully there will be more offered as folks come to understand the advantages of breeding this way. I'd like to explain the process a bit and discuss the advantages and disadvantages of using shipped semen and what it can mean to a rare breed like ours.

What is shipped semen is exactly? There are two ways to ship semen...frozen and fresh cooled semen, and there are advantages and disadvantages to both types. The names are pretty descriptive at what they are...fresh cooled is collected a short time before you need to breed your mare, extended to keep it alive, cooled and shipped in a container to the mare where it is inseminated before ovulation or shortly afterwards. It is not enhanced or changed in anyway. The extender is usually a milk based formula designed to keep it alive until it can be placed in the mare. Frozen Semen can be collected at anytime in a stallion's life and stored indefinitely so even long dead stallions can sire foals. Just think if we still had the opportunity to breed to some of our foundation stallions that are deceased how advantageous that would be for the breed!

All shipped semen is...when you get down to it... is packaging up the stallion's donation and delivering them to the mare to fertilize her egg instead of bringing two horses together physically. It's not unnatural in any way except the horses are not actually breeding live cover. Breeding this way is highly accepted and used in nearly all breeds in the US with one exception...Jockey Club thoroughbreds. Their restriction to use live cover only is more for economic reasons than for anything else.

Fresh cooled semen generally has a higher fertility rate than frozen but its life is short...72 hours at most and the older it gets, the less effective or "motile" it is. Your timing is much more critical generally than when using frozen semen in that you really need to work with a good vet who can help you predict when to order the semen to get it delivered when you need it....not too early or too late. Most stallions can be shipped fresh with few problems and still maintain a good motility rate.

Frozen semen can be stored and kept frozen until the mare is ready to receive it for optimum fertilization success. The downside to frozen semen is that fertility rates generally are lower and your vet has to be very on top of things to time insemination within 12 hours of ovulation which is the longest frozen semen can last after thawing. Also some stallions, for a reason no one can understand yet, cannot get a mare in foal once their semen has been frozen and thawed. The only way to know if it works is to test it and many stallion owners will give doses away on young stallions to people willing to give it a try and accept the risk that it might not work. Fertility rates for fresh cooled semen is about 70% to 80% and frozen semen a bit less...probably about 60%-70%. Live cover ranges at about 80%-90% with many breeders doing even better than that.

You may be sitting there now asking why anyone would want to breed this way and what advantages are there. From a larger view, for a breed like ours that is widely scattered across the continent and now around the world, it allows a much wider selection of stallions to the mare owners than ever before. In many regions of the country, we have groups of horses in that region sired by the popular stallions of larger breeders in that area and oftentimes these horses are fairly closely related. In the case of the Minnesota mare owner, she was able to select a stallion unrelated to her mare and outcross without having to take her mare anywhere. It is for the benefit of the breed for us to maintain the genetic health and to be careful to not inbreed or line breed any more than necessary and this is a tool that will help.

Someone in the United Kingdom could order frozen semen from the US and not be limited by what might be only close relatives for closely available stallions. Stallions that specialize in one discipline or another such as endurance, western events, or English type riding can be chosen by mare owners hoping to produce a foal with strong potential in that discipline also. Using this option can help us preserve the genetic viability of our horses and open up options that for us might have never been possible before.

From the mare owner's perspective there are many advantages and few disadvantages. The costs of shipping a mare from one side of the country to another are stupendous especially now that gas prices have gotten so high. It can cost...easily...\$1,000 to ship one horse one way from somewhere like Minnesota to Virginia now....and that's just a one way trip...From one coast to the other several thousand and overseas...many thousands. If the mare has a foal at her side, shipping that distance puts the foal at great risk also from the stress as well. Many mares also do not do well when shipped; and sometimes you get them in foal and they will slip the foal from the stress of the ride home...and all your money and efforts were for nothing. Sending the mare to the stallion's farm or ranch also exposes her and the foal to strange horses and a greater potential for disease or sickness. Board costs can add up also and if it takes more than one cycle to get her in foal, it can easily cost more than the AI costs. The only disadvantage with shipped semen is that it is a bit more costly than just breeding to the stallion nearby but not as much so as you might think by the time you figure in boarding and shipping costs.

For one cycle to breed AI with a mare using transported semen, the costs can range from \$200-400 each try not counting the stud fee which you'd pay anyway. A lot depends on the vet or clinic the mare owner uses as well as the stallion owners costs. Generally the mare owner pays collection costs as well as shipping costs. I was paying \$175 to the collection facility 2.5 hours from me to collect my stallion, prepare the semen and ship it. They charged nothing extra for the shipping but did take a deposit to use their Equitainer to be sure it was returned to them. Shipping to Minnesota from Virginia was about \$70 not counting the cost of returning the container. There are disposable shippers available but they do not keep the semen viable for more than 24-48 hours typically and are more subject to damage in shipment. Depending on the vet and luck, you could have them out 3-4 times to do the palpations/ultrasounds and the actual insemination which is quite easy to do. I found while I was doing this a few years ago that taking the mare to the local clinic was less stressful for me and cost no more ultimately...and it was much more convenient for the vet. In most breeds, with a healthy mare and a fertile stallion, 2 breeding cycles to get a mare in foal seems to be the average but in this case, we got the mare caught on the first try. Of course things can go wrong. The semen can get delayed in shipping and it might arrive after the mare ovulates (another advantage frozen has over fresh) or the vet might misjudge ovulation. It can happen and does happen but most of the time, you get a shot at it.

What does it take for a stallion to be trained and to be offered at stud this way? To get my stallion trained for AI, I spent about \$700 and nearly a week at the clinic doing the actual training and semen evaluation as I knew very little at that time on how it all worked. He already knew how to hand breed...that is important...but most stallions that are handled should be easy to train for hand breeding. I wish I knew then what I know now after attending equine reproduction classes as I could have easily taught him myself and saved that money. Currently, I am trying to get the equipment and get set up here at my farm to collect Cisco myself and then I can offer the shipments/collection costs at a much reduced rate to mare owners than I would be charged by the clinic. Also it would save me that 5 hour round trip and the gas costs which I did not charge to the mare owner, so it is a better situation for everyone involved. Hopefully in a year or so we will offer a second young stallion this way also.

In a nutshell, the advantages of using shipped semen to breed outweigh the disadvantages in most cases, and it is a valuable tool to help us preserve our breed's genetic variability. It is a particularly useful too for the small breeder who has no interest in keeping a stallion or stallions or wants to keep their own fillies and avoid inbreeding. If anyone has any questions on breeding this way or getting set up to do collections on their stallions, please don't hesitate

to contact me. rbefarm@mac.com I'd love to be able to help other breeders get set up to do this so we can all experience the benefits. I know I am hoping to breed some of my mares to some other stallions in a few years and already have my eyes on Simrat's lovely stallion Paisano in Oregon and with shipped semen it is not only possible but easy and affordable.

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