

The Prize

By Annette Miller

A placid September breeze drifted gently over the long meadow grass, turning the hills into an emerald sea. Far off, the green grass waves lap gently against the black post and rail fences. A row of sturdy maple trees, arrogantly boasted the first fiery red and lemon yellow leaves of Fall.

This is Windfields Farm, birthplace of many a champion race-horse. In these sea green fields Northern Dancer, world champion race-horse, stretched his legs for the first time.

I work at Windfields Farm, keeping a skillful eye on these potential champions, during the quiescent night hours. The farm stretches lazily over 1,200 acres of rolling green hills and 400 thoroughbred horses call it home. To cover this area, and this number of horses, there are always two night watch persons on duty every night. We drive around in company vehicles scrutinizing the mares and foals as they doze in the fields.

The foaling season starts on January 1 with the arrival of the first gangling foals and ends on June 15, but we do breed about 6 non-thoroughbred nurse mares, out of season, just in case one of the blue-blooded foals needs a foster Mom.

Overseeing all this is the Broodmare Manager, Paul Whiting, a ruggedly handsome Irishman, tall with dark features. A quiet man, appearing to be deep in thought most of the time, unhurried to answer an individual, which often leaves you wondering if you had interrupted a serious train of thought.

As the nights are long and lonely, I take my dog with me. She is a 4 year old purebred border collie, with a very mischievous character, and the kindest brown almond shaped eyes that could melt the heart of the toughest disciplinarian. As she was the smallest in the litter, from my bitch Jen, I

kept her and called her, because of her diminutive size, Tot. Frequently referred to as Tiny Tot, but as her strong character and fortitude developed, her fight for survival grew strong and she ended up being nicknamed Little Miss Tot.

From the age of nine months, Little Miss Tot has suffered from severe epilepsy. A horrific and devastating disease, and the Little Miss puts up a stoic battle against it and the after-effects of the medication. One of those after-effects is an insatiable desire for food, meal times are ravenously anticipated with incensed pacing of the kitchen floor.

Tonya had started working at Windfields that previous week. She was a robust girl with a great sense of humor, a seriousness about her work that was admirable. Her capricious nature made working with her interesting and enjoyable.

Our first nurse mare foaled at 4:30 on a clammy Saturday morning. I had left the farm to purchase two much needed cups of coffee for us, when my phone croaked into life.

"Come quick! There something wrong with Rosie, there's a white bag hanging out of her rear end." Tonya shouted excitedly.

"OK, OK, stay with her, she's beginning to foal. Everything is alright, I'll be right back." I said calmly, trying to inspire confidence.

Rosie foaled easily, and within half an hour a white legged, chestnut colt was struggling to stand on wobbly legs. Tonya, being a dedicated student, was listening to every instruction I gave and obeying them to the very last detail. As this was her first foaling, Tonya was taking all this very seriously, and she wanted everything perfect.

Pink clouds, zigzagged across the horizon, promising another beautiful day. The foal, his belly full of warm mother's milk, bucked as the first crimson rays of the rising sun touched his moist back, sending him off on his first shaky canter around his mother. The mare, anxiously calling to him,

trotted dutifully off after her unsteady son. The placenta, tied up beautifully by Tonya, swayed to and fro like a glob of pink chewed gum.

On my arrival at the farm, that following evening, I found that Rosie still had not passed the afterbirth. After an injection of oxytocin it eventually came out with an almighty plop.

Of course at Windfields, the foaling of the mares is a very technical process. There are certain procedures which we must follow. One is to carefully weigh and examine the placenta. The weight relates directly to the health of the foal. It could also indicate a persistent infection in the mare. The entire placenta must be accounted for, if a piece has torn off and been retained by the mare the results could be deadly.

As it was my job to teach Tonya the correct procedure. I fetched the beautiful stainless steel bucket we use, with PLACENTA printed on it in large black lettering, and into this gleaming container we slopped the placenta. This one, being already 12 hours old, was beginning to smell unpleasant and looked really gross.

We weigh the thoroughbred mares' placentas on a special electronic scale, but do you think we could find this scale. No, it had long ago disappeared, lost forever in the dark abyss of the storage room, co-mingling happily with all the other junk collected over the decades by various Windfield employees. All this time, Little Miss Tot was becoming increasingly interested in the contents of the gleaming stainless steel bucket.

Eventually after a long discussion, Tonya and I decided the only thing to do was weigh the placenta on the scale we use to weight the foals. It is a large platform type scale, standing about 6" off the ground, with a large digital read-out which was mounted on the opposite wall.

Tonya managed to turn on this fancy scale and zeroed it out. We placed the shiny bucket with its distinctly fragrant contents, in the middle of

the platform and both turn our backs on it to read the digital figures appearing on the dial. 3, 5, 9, 18, 24, 28, 36, 48.....

WOW! This was one heavy placenta. We both turn, glance at each other, and immediately the penny dropped. Little Miss Tot had climbed onto the scale, gotten a good grip on the placenta, and was in the process of pulling it out of the bucket.

"Oh my God. No Tot!" shrieked Tonya.

With this Little Miss Tot, took off with the placenta in tow, knocking the bucket over and spilling all the yucky, bloody, goopy liquid that had collected at the bottom of the bucket.

The Little Miss ran clean through the barn, the placenta dragging along behind her, picking up straw, horse manure, dirt and every other delight you can imagine that lurks on a horse barn floor.

Personally I have never seen the Little Miss move so fast, head up dragging the placenta between her legs, out onto the gravel road, heading straight for my company truck. Of course I always leave the door open so the Little Miss can run ahead and jump straight in when we leave the barn.

With one all mighty leap Little Miss Tot jumped onto my seat, slipping and sliding on this huge hunk of reeking mess, her hind feet battling to gain a foot hold on the seat, hell bent on taking this delicious piece of meat with her, obviously planning on an all night orgy of eating.

By this stage I was in no condition to help Tonya retrieve her prized placenta. Out of the corner of my eye, as I dived into the washroom, I saw Tonya having a tug of war with the Little Miss, trying to retrieve her cherished placenta and the Little Miss was not giving it up without a fight.

It was around this time Paul called on the phone, and asked what the weight was on the placenta. Obviously by my tone of voice, as I was splitting my sides laughing, he realized there must be a problem and decided it would be better to come on down and see for himself just what was happening.

There I was, my truck seat covered in bloody delights and bits of afterbirth, trying to pry Tot's jaw open to retrieve this disgusting mess that was once a placenta.

A look of dismay came over Paul's face when he saw the placenta. He gingerly picked it up with gloved hands, turned it inside out, brushing off stones, gravel, hay, horse manure etc, noting the teeth holes and chunks missing. He shook his head in bafflement, straightened up from examining the putrefying mess, turned and walked out of the barn, not uttering a word.

A warm breeze drifted softly over the long meadow grass. The crescent moon hid shyly behind dark clouds. A refreshing summer shower cooled the sultry heat of the day and the beautiful aroma of wet earth filtered upwards. The horses, turned their rumps into the rain, and rested.

All was well at Windfields Farm.