

community

on Mätthis shoulders! They thrilled the audience more than we Instructors did!

When Mätthias was about 17 years, we took him along to the Equitana in Germany so he could see Pat and Linda live. At home, not a week had passed since Equitana and Mätthias took us out of the house with the words “we can do it now too.” Dragon was waiting un-tethered in the yard. Matthias called him and sat down on the ground, Dragon went to stand behind him, lifted his front leg and put his hoof on Mätthias’s head!

On another occasion we were riding in the woods and suddenly heard a horse cantering. Around the next bend we encountered Dragon with Mätthias, standing in the saddle, a cool smile on his face, and then they just cantered quietly past us.

Whenever you rode somewhere and saw a white spot on the edge of the forest you knew for sure that this was Mätthias with Dragon laying in the grass-land! To this day the most important thing for these two is that it never should be boring! These two are incredible, I could spend hours telling such stories



about this unusual team. Mätthias’s parents are convinced that Dragon has had a mammoth share in the personal development of Matthias into the man he is today.

Atwood Ranch

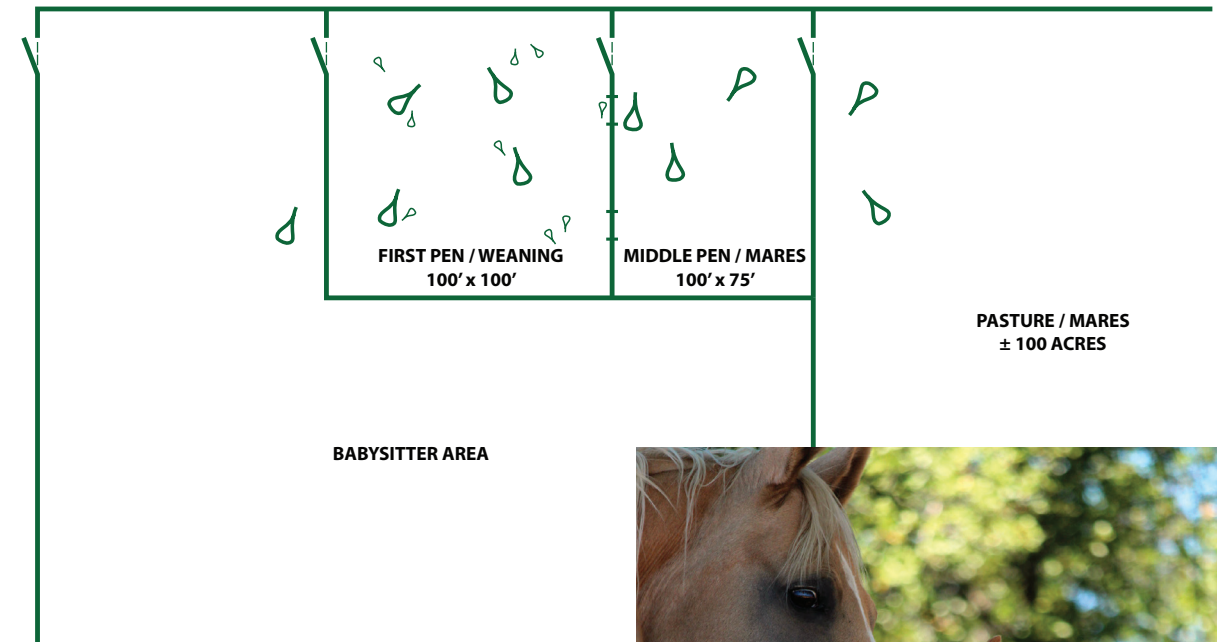
The Atwood Ranch difference...

In the golden foothills of Northern California, Fall brings welcomed cooler temperatures as the old valley oaks begin to lose their leaves in the wind. It’s also weaning time! Mares are beginning to prepare for next Spring’s foals, while this year’s sucklings are establishing their independence and spending more and more time with their own herd of friends.

While weaning time has traditionally been known as a time of high stress in a young foal’s life, the incidence of injury and sickness are known to be equally high. At Atwood Ranch, progressive trials over many years have led to developing a weaning process that is slow and savvy. They have coined it “stretching”, as it stretches the bond between mare and foal in a

slow deliberate fashion, much like the umbilicus is stretched at birth until it gently severs.

Based on the practice of fence weaning in cattle, two pens are set in a row adjacent to a pasture. The first pen is roughly 100’ x 100’, large enough to allow 5 -10 mares and foals to eat, drink and not scuffle, yet small enough that foals cannot get up speed in an attempt to jump out. The second pen, sharing a fence line with the first, is a little shallower at about 75’ x 100’. The back fence line of that second pen is the pasture fence line of a much larger field comprising about 100 acres. The fence line between the first two smaller pens has one gate and two nursing panels, with the bars spaced wide enough for a foal to safely put his head through and nurse.



The foals stay by their dams’ side for six months. Having handled the foals extensively since birth, the Atwood Ranch team is aware of whose strength of bond is the weakest. A group of 5 - 10 mares and their foals, who have already been pastured together, are moved into the first pen with plenty of food to help them settle. On the second day, the mare with the weakest bond (the mare who is pretty unconcerned with her offspring or whose foal is the most independent) is moved into the second pen at feeding time. Her foal is left with his friends and “aunties” in the first pen. If he is concerned, or if the mare’s bag is full and sore, they can meet at the nursing panel and help one another. So although there is a fence between them, they can still touch, nurse and get comfort from each other.

If all is quiet on the second day, another mare is selected to join the first mare in the middle pen. And each day the pattern continues. As the group of mares in the center pen grows, the first of the mares is moved out to the big pasture. Feeder boxes are placed close to the fence line so she can stay in sight of her foal. She may leave to go to water but returns to the fence line to be near her herd. Over time, she goes off to graze, comfortable leaving her foal in the pen with his friends and the other mares. Every day or two another mare is moved from the center pen to the big pasture.

In the meantime, a babysitter, has been housed around the outside of the weaning pen, getting to know the foals over the fence. When the last mare is ready to be taken into the middle pen, the babysitter is introduced to the foals and put in the 100’ x 100’

pen with them. Babysitters, adult geldings or mares, are tested and selected for their leadership, patience and disciplinary fairness. Some horses are just built to nurture while others are not. A good babysitter is worth his or her weight in gold.

Day by day as the mares depart the middle pen for the big pasture, the feeder boxes are moved slowly further and further from the fence line. Ten days to two weeks after weaning begins, the foals and their trusty babysitter are freeloading into the stock trailer and taken back to the field from which they came - familiar surroundings together with the same little friends they’ve grown up with and one new leader. The incidence of stress, illness and injury is greatly reduced utilizing the stretching method. And after all, a healthy, happy, emotionally fit baby is the objective!

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