



# The Longest Nights

There's no such thing as an easy day at a foaling farm, just a long one.

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**BELOW:** One of the many foals born at Brazos Valley Stallion Station enjoys an afternoon in the spring grass of the pasture at the palatial breeding farm.



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**I**n the hushed hours of the night, when the world slumbers under a quilt of stars, there exists a realm of whispered anticipation and tireless dedication — foaling season. As the moon casts its silvery glow over rolling pastures and the air hums with the gentle symphony of nature, a dedicated group of individuals embarks on a journey that transcends the boundaries of time and sleep. Beyond the quiet fields and warm barns, an extraordinary spectacle unfolds — one that demands unwavering commitment, palpable passion and an unyielding resolve to

witness the miracle of birth.

This is the dance of the breeding farm. It starts in January, with the swan song typically coming in the heat of summer. It takes a special kind of willingness to give up social lives and sleep for five months straight. These devoted caretakers, armed with a unique blend of expertise and empathy, stand sentinel over expectant mares, navigating the delicate dance between science and intuition. Each impending birth is a testament to the convergence of meticulous planning and the unpredictable whims of nature, requiring a blend of skill, patience and a touch of that indefinable magic that transforms a tranquil night into a stage for life's most enchanting performance.

## FOR THE LOVE OF LIFE

“Ultimately, I love life,” says Lisa Szwejbka, general manager of the Brazos Valley Stallion Station in Stephenville, Texas. “I love getting to see the newest kid on the farm. Something about that is so magical; it doesn't matter how many times you see the foal figure out how to walk for the first time. It just makes me happy.”

After all, there must be something magical to keep Szwejbka and the staff at Brazos Valley Stallion Station managing hundreds of broodmares year after year. The ranch, based on more than 300 acres of land, staffs approximately 40 people throughout the season. Opened in 2012, it's owned in partnership between Jeremy and Candace Barwick, David Ricks, DVM and Charlie Buchanan, DVM, of Signature Equine Hospital.

“[Foaling] is a seven-day-a-week job with long hours,” says Dr. Ricks, the resident veterinarian. “There's no real start time and end time — it's a ‘whatever time it is’ time. You have to have a lot of dedication.”

Szwejbka and Ricks both agree that a reward of working at Brazos Valley is the connection you start to build between clients and horses, as well as foals that you get to follow along in their careers. For the team that spends roughly half a year working long hours, night and day, there's a sense of accomplishment that they “did it” when a foal hits the ground healthy.

“There's just something about watching the breeder that has just one horse [because] you know that is their heart horse — and you get to be the one to witness the foal hit the ground,” Szwejbka says. “Then you get to watch the owner meet the baby that means so much to them ... There's nothing that beats it.”

**TOP AND BOTTOM:** From securing pregnancy in mares to the day of foaling, BVSS takes all necessary measures to ensure mares are healthy and beautiful foals are born safely.





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**LISA SZWEJBKA**

#### **24 HOUR SERVICE**

Brazos Valley is a full-service breeding facility, where the ranch boards privately-owned broodmares for owners year-round, as well as owns 110 to 120 recipient mares for artificial insemination and Intracytoplasmic Sperm Injection, or ICSI, purposes and hosts almost 100 haul-ins for foaling purposes each year. They stand 42 cutting, roping and barrel racing stallions and provide sales preparation for some of the largest stock sales in the industry every fall.

“The breeding never stops,” Ricks says. “We have a truly great staff that works with the goal of each horse’s health being a priority.”

With such large numbers, it’s easy to see how important it is to have a system that runs smoothly. Or rather, a chess game, according to Szwejbka.

Mares are put under lights starting around Thanksgiving, when all the mares wear EquiLume masks to help regulate their cycles. Weather

dependent, the mares are outside as much as possible.

“A lot of our mares were show horses previously, so they saw a ton of stall time in the past,” Szwejbka says. “Being able to turn them out and let them be horses is so gratifying.”

Come January, the staff begins their rounds of checking masks and performing cultures to ensure each mare is clean and free of any potential harm. The staff knows each mare’s due date and will continue daily checks to see if a mare is coming close to foaling. Two weeks before her due date, the mare moves into the foaling barn for closer observation and consistent milk, pH and calcium tests. A Foal Alert is sewn in as they near birthing time.

**ABOVE:** Breeding season at Brazos Valley begins on February 1 and continues through July 15 each year.

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“It’s long hours, but there’s so much adrenaline when the Foal Alert goes off,” Szejbka says.

Routine foal “outs” are managed exclusively by the staff working that shift. Cameras cover the eight main foaling stalls, and Ricks can see from his home how things are going when he receives the notification from Foal Alert. A veterinary intern lives in a house on the ranch, just five minutes from the foaling farm, in case an extra hand is needed.

“The nice thing about horses is they can typically manage foaling themselves, unlike cattle,” Ricks says. “If the horse can’t handle it, it’s usually because it’s a big deal.”

On average, out of the more than 200 foals born each year at Brazos Valley, Ricks is called in only three or four times for a major issue with a foal. It’s those challenging times that can take a toll not only for the particular employee working that day, but everyone on the ranch.

“It’s never something you want to see, but you do have to detach yourself a little bit in order to be productive during [the dystocia],” Szejbka says. “If you’re super stressed out and panicky, it’s not going to be good. At the end of the day, when you lose, it hurts. It affects you the rest of the day, sometimes the rest of the week. Then you become super raw to it, so if anything else even remotely behaves that way, you’re sensitive and you overreact. When we lose, it’s never a good day. It’s never our goal.”

The physical exhaustion and overbearing sadness weighs on each employee when a birth goes badly, but there are other animals relying on them. Each employee helps to clean up and give themselves a little bit of



time to process it all.

“At the end of the day, you have all these other mares and foals and all those clients who count on you,” Szejbka says. “So, you have to tell yourself you’re allowed to feel a certain way for this amount of time, but we’ll revisit our grief or frustration at the end of the day.”

Luckily, those days are rare. With each birth, the staff takes great care to ensure the foal is off to the best start. Plasma is given to the foal within 24 hours of birth to help with

hemoglobin levels, as are rhodococcus antibodies to battle the seriousness of the bacterial disease that causes pneumonia. Then, the staff creates some space in order to give mama and baby time to bond.

“Since 90% of our broodmares are recipient mares, we try to just let the bond happen,” Ricks says. “This way, the mare will relax and allow us to approach the foal safely, if needed. Most recipient mares aren’t chosen for their personalities, so it can get pretty hairy.”

**TOP AND BOTTOM:** More than 200 foals are born annually at Brazos Valley and around 90% of the BVSS broodmares are recipient mares. The large mare barn accommodates everyone comfortably.



## GROWING UP AND MOVING ON

Foals then learn the basics of being a horse while being handled regularly by the staff. In the first two weeks, the foals are groomed and will start to wear a halter to learn about gentle pulling and pressure. Mare and foal will move out to small tracts to let them be outside, but still protect the foal's legs from too much pressure. At about 4 weeks old, they'll graduate to a larger pasture where the foals can stretch their legs and be turned out with other foals their age.

"We don't want them to run around full speed in a pasture when they're too young, because they'll slowly go over the knee," Szwajbka explains. "We like to keep our babies

on their mamas closer to six months before we wean."

That's when the mare and foal come back into the barn, and foals receive their final round of vaccines and deworming. Weanlings are then started on the basics of being a horse: Learning to stand tied for grooming, being led, getting hosed off and being willing to be caught. Once they graduate kindergarten, they're put back out in a field, left to grow and be a horse until they turn 1 year old.

Sales season gets hectic with the addition of yearlings, but it's a time when each employee reacquaints themselves with the foals they spent so many hours worrying over. The yearlings will move on to the next portion of their lives while the Brazos Valley staff stay in Stephenville,

hoping to catch them on the television during the big shows.

"We try our best to keep tabs on all of them," Szwajbka says. "When the National Cutting Horse Association Futurity or a big show is going on, every room on the farm that has a TV or computer will have the shows on. We'll see when our babies are showing, and we'll crowd around a screen to cheer them on, and then we go back to work. We do keep a close eye on them. It's so fulfilling." 🐾

**ABOVE:** The staff manage foal "outs" by taking shifts watching the eight cameras covering the main foaling stalls and also through the utilization of foal alerts.