

Qualitative Assessment of the Young Foals' Human Related Behaviour

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Bulletin UASVM Veterinary Medicine 71(2) / 2014,

Print ISSN 1843-5270; Electronic ISSN 1843-5378

DOI:10.15835/buasvmcn-vm: 10719

Abstract

This study's aim was to assess comparatively the human related behaviour of young, unweaned foals at different ages, in order to discover if significant differences can be found.

In a horse breeding farm a total number of 28 young, unweaned foals were tested in the presence of a human person, using qualitative behaviour assessment (QBA) with fixed terms (FT). The first assessment was made during the first week of life of each foal, than it was repeated at the ages of six weeks and 20 weeks. Four terms were used to describe the behaviour of the foal toward the assessor (friendly, indifferent, timid or scared). The prevalence of each response was calculated for each behaviour and comparisons were made.

After comparing the results, statistically significant differences were found in the human related behaviour of the young foals at different ages. During their first week of life more foals were friendly towards humans than at the age of six weeks, but less than at the age of 20 weeks. Indifference was practically not found in any of the foals. The majority of the scared foals tended to keep this behaviour as they grew older.

The human related behaviour of the young, unweaned foals can improve (i.e. become more friendly) during their development. More research is needed to reveal the possible factors that can lead to a better relationship between foals, young and adult horses and humans.

Keywords: *qualitative behaviour assessment, reactivity to humans, unweaned foals*

Introduction. The human related behaviour in young, unweaned foals is a less studied and interesting domain, especially when a qualitative method is used for this. In our knowledge this is a first study of this type performed in Romania. According to Ladewig (2002) as a foal grows there are a number of phases of behavioural development. During these stages the young animal can respond differently to various stimuli from the environment and in order to achieve a normal development certain environmental stimulation is needed. As domestic animals, horses have to interact with humans and a good interspecific relationship is desirable for the safety and well-being of both partners (human and horse) when working together (Visser, 2007). In

order to raise horses that are optimally prepared for the various tasks, for which they are used, it is important to understand the different phases of behaviour development and what factors are important for this development (Ladewig, 2002). Assessing the foals' behaviour towards humans in different phases of their development can add to the knowledge needed for proper horse breeding.

Aims and objectives. This study aimed to comparatively assess the human related behaviour of young, unweaned foals at different ages to see if any significant difference can be found.

Materials and methods. A total number of 28 young, unweaned foals were assessed in a

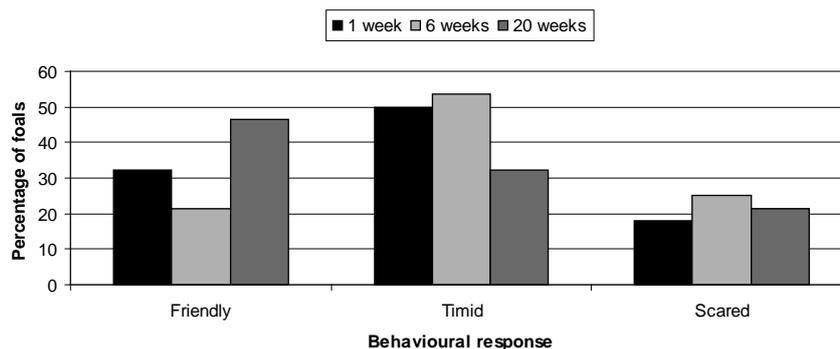


Fig. 1. Proportion of the foals showing a given behavioural response towards humans at specific ages

horse breeding farm, using qualitative behaviour assessment (QBA) with fixed terms (FT). The first assessment was made during the first week of life of each foal, than it was repeated at the ages of six weeks and 20 weeks. The first assessment was performed in a box where the dam and her foal were kept usually 14 days after giving birth. The other two assessments took place outside, in the yard or pasture, without any contention of the foal or the dam, using a human approach test. The researcher approached the foal in a standardised way, than attempted physical contact by touching the foal's shoulder. Four terms were used to describe the behaviour of the foal toward the assessor (friendly, indifferent, timid or scared). The prevalence of each response was calculated for each behaviour and comparisons were made and the value of minimal significance was considered at $P < 0.05$.

Results and Discussion. The prevalence of the different behaviours of the foals towards humans at different ages is presented in Fig 1. Indifference was practically absent in the tested foals. Regarding a specific behavioural response significantly ($P < 0.05$) more foals were friendly at the age of 20 weeks than the younger (Fig. 1). As regards the age, the timid response towards the researcher was significantly more prevalent ($P < 0.05$) in the foals of one week and six weeks of age than at 20 weeks of age (Fig. 1). The majority of the scared foals tended to keep this behaviour as they grew older but the differences regarding this response between the age groups were not statistically significant ($P > 0.05$).

Comparing our results with the findings of Lansade *et al.* (2007) we noted some differences. In their study the human avoidance was almost

non-existent in three week old foals and became more evident as they grew older. Interestingly, in our study part of the youngest foals were really scared by human approach and the more friendly ones were found in the older group. This friendliness of the older foals may be caused by the absence of negative experiences with humans and presence of the positive ones and also by curiosity. Of course, many factors can influence the development of certain behaviours in foals and these might be different depending on the studied farm. As Lansade *et al.* (2007) states, early handling could be used to familiarize foals with management procedures.

Conclusion. The human related behaviour of the young, unweaned foals can improve (i.e. become more friendly) during their development. Probably the reactivity to humans can be influenced in order to achieve a more desirable behaviour in young horses, with possible effects on the quality of the relationship between people and the adult animals. More research is needed to reveal the possible factors that can lead to a better relationship between foals, young and adult horses and humans.

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