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A year in the life of Central Kentucky horse farms

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Workers prepared to bring in yearling fillies at sunrise on the Mill Ridge Farm, 2800 Bowman Mill Rd. in Lexington, Ky., Thursday, January, 05, 2012. The farm will be celebrating their 50th anniversary this year. Charles Bertram | Staff HERALD-LEADER [Buy Photo](#)

On horse farms, winter is a time of waiting. Waiting for foals to arrive, waiting for breeding season to start.

At Mill Ridge Farm in Lexington, the atmosphere is expectant, in every sense of the word. Heavily pregnant mares with swollen winter-fuzzy bellies spend their days eating and enjoying sunshine when they can. For those not in foal, it's a peaceful month in frosty pastures, except when they aren't getting their teeth filed.

"It's really the most quiet time of the year," said Headley Bell, who now runs the day-to-day operations of the farm founded in 1962 by his mother, Alice Bell (now Chandler).

Because every Thoroughbred foal born in the Northern Hemisphere shares the birthdate of Jan. 1 for racing, breeders try to time the foals to arrive as soon after the first of the year as possible. But nobody wants to cut it too close and wind up with a December foal instead.

Breeding season for the 11-month gestation cycle will begin Feb. 15. In the meantime, farms watch pregnant mares and wait. As their due date approaches, mares who show signs of impending birth spend the night in the barn, where a watchman keeps a close eye.

Most stay outside overnight, something they prefer.

Those mares not in foal, such as La Ville Rouge, mother of 2006 Kentucky Derby winner Barbaro, may spend the night inside "under lights."

If you've ever driven past a farm on a cold winter night and wondered why the lights are blazing from the barns, this is probably why: The lights help trick the broodmares' bodies into cycling regularly, essentially an artificial spring, so they can be ready for breeding next month. This spring, La Ville Rouge will be heading across the road to visit top stallion Bernardini at nearby Darley, owned by Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum, in the hopes of producing another winner, the eternal chase for racing glory.

She isn't Mill Ridge's only mother of a Kentucky Derby winner on the farm: Set Them Free, dam of 2005's Giacomo, is expecting a foal by Malibu Moon. Giacomo was foaled at Mill Ridge and so holds an especially rosy place in the farm's heart.

Set Them Free is still owned by Jerry and Ann Moss, the California record producer and his wife. (The mare and many of the Mosses' other horses have names linked to the singer Sting, whom Jerry Moss recorded on his A&M Records.)

Mill Ridge's client roster reads like a who's who of top owners and breeders, among them the Mosses; Ben Leon, who was the top buyer at the Keeneland November Breeding Stock Sale; Gretchen and Roy Jackson, breeders of Barbaro; Jim Tafel, who owned 2007 Kentucky Derby winner Street Sense; and Nancy Dillman, breeder of 2011 Horse of the year Havre de Grace.

"We've been very fortunate. We've got the best in clientele," Bell said. He attributes that partly to his mother's influence and partly to the level of care the farm gives to horses, down to the grooms who are there seven days a week, rain or shine, hot or cold. In January, the day starts before sunrise and temperatures in the teens mean ice has to be broken up on the water tanks in the pasture. Hay has to be put out in sometimes snowy fields.

The numbing cold means everything moves slower; in the mist rising off a stream, time itself seems almost frozen. At Mill Ridge, which is celebrating its 50th anniversary this year, the season has a particularly timeless feel.

The farm's philosophy: "Let the horse drive your passions," Bell said. "Always make your decisions on what's best for the horse."

Big decisions are being made right now. Future matings are being planned, and mares are being "booked" to top stallions, if they haven't already got a date. To that end, many farms hold an "open house" during the Keeneland January Horses of All Ages Sale to promote their stallion roster one last time. The January sale draws visitors from all over the world looking for fillies and mares in foal as well as "short" yearlings, who have just turned 1 but won't have a true birthday for a while.

Veterinarians are regular farm visitors and spend hours every day checking mares getting ready to breed and foals getting ready to drop.

Foaling season begins in January and the magic often happens in the middle of the night. Because horses are prey animals, giving birth at night might be nature's way of giving them a leg up on survival. Foals usually can stand and walk almost immediately and will be running and jumping within days.

The cycle of horse life starts in the dark, with new life ready to face the next dawn.

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