



Jason Abraham

# Value Transfer

By Wes Ishmael

*Recipient mares, rather than cattle, are paying the bills for the Abraham ranch these days.*

“It’s a whole lot easier to sell people something they want rather than something they need,” says Jason Abraham, explaining why there are no longer any cattle on this ranch southwest of Canadian. Just horses.

“When we started with the horses it was to diversify; then the diversification became our main income,” says Abraham, who owns the ranch with his two older brothers. The ranch was formerly home to the Short A Cattle Co. Now it’s known as Abraham Equine, Inc., one of the largest and most respected recipient mare operations in the nation.

Along with some of Abraham’s own

brood mares and studs, 450 recipient mares leased out for embryo transfer (ET) are the only grass converters on the place.

## **Seizing alternate possibility**

If you’re unfamiliar with it, equine embryo transfer — which began to take root in the ’70s — is a whole lot like the bovine version, but it’s even more dollar-intense. You can’t super-ovulate mares the way you can cows. Plus, mares cycle seasonally rather than year-round. Except for extraordinary instances, Abraham says that means you’re lucky to harvest three embryos from a mare in a year.

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So, there are fewer embryos to dilute transfer costs. On top of that, no one has yet figured out how to effectively freeze, thaw and then transfer equine embryos. That means when you transplant an embryo you must have a recipient lined up whose estrus cycle is synchronized with the age of the embryo being transplanted.

When Abraham started exploring the world of equine embryo transfer, to offer it as a service to clients who were using his studs, he immediately recognized the recipient challenge faced by embryo transfer centers.

“What makes embryo transfer in equine such a challenge is that you have to have a recipient mare synced up with the embryo,” emphasizes Abraham. “You want to work with a seven-day embryo, which

means you’ve also been working to get a recipient mare cycling five to six days ahead of the transfer.

“I could see the problem these big stud farms were having with recips in terms of numbers and space. Stud farms can buy recipients, but they have to feed them every day. I can do it here for a tenth of the cost.”

Keep in mind, the vagaries of Mom Nature mean breeding, flushing and transferring an embryo, then transplanting it into a recipient mare, are imperfect sciences.

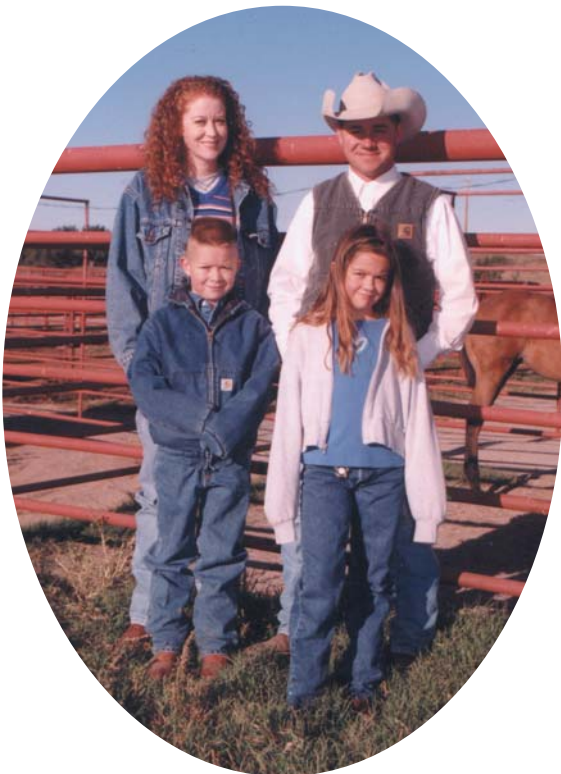
You can have the recip mare’s estrus cycle synchronized with the age of the donor’s embryo, then something goes awry and you not only lose the dollars invested in the flushing and transfer, but now you have a recipient that can’t be used again until

“Every year we do this the mares get better and better,” says Jason Abraham of the 450 recipient mares he leases through Abraham Equine, Inc., southwest of Canadian.





Jason Abraham's goal is for horse breeders to request his recipient mares, each carrying the Short A brand.



Abraham Equine, Inc., is a family affair: Jason and Bonnie with son, Luke, and daughter, Maddie.

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she's in sync with another donor female.

Bottom line, the logistics of lining up recipient mares could make an airport air traffic controller lose sleep. You must have lots of recipients running around to successfully transfer just a handful of embryos, each costing plenty to maintain. On top of that, it's not like just any mare waltzing through a sale ring is recipient material.

### **Recipients are the key to ET success**

"Out of 100 mares there might be 60 that work," says Abraham. Whether it's health, reproductive soundness, conformational soundness or stability of mind, that many fail to make the grade for Abraham.

"The first thing we look at is size. We want a mare that is at least 15 hands, between three and eight years old." Because of the size requirement, most of Abraham's recipis come out of Montana and South Dakota. "She needs to be halter broke and gentle enough that we can put her into the stock to palpate her reproductive tract without her killing herself or us.

"That's the hardest part, buying these mares, being able to palpate them and use ultrasound to determine whether or not they're reproductively sound," says Abraham.

Of course, health is essential, too. Any new mares Abraham brings into the herd are quarantined. Likewise, lease mares returned to the ranch are quarantined at the ET center before coming back home.

"None of this works unless you have a good home for the embryo. You can be the best ET man there is, but without a good recip you're just wasting your time," says Abraham. "If you've got \$10,000 wrapped up in an embryo, you don't want to take a chance on the recipient."

Typically, he explains, "Your first cost in embryo transplant will be \$4,000 to \$5,000 for the flushing, embryo transplant and use of a recipient. Then you have the stud fee on top of that – \$2,500 to \$15,000 for a name brand stud. Then, there's the value of the mare you're flushing...You might do all of that work, flush the donor mares and not even get an embryo."

Consequently, recipients are justifiably one of the more costly components of the ET equation.

"A good recipient mare is the secret really,"

says Dr. Greg Veneklasen, who owns Timber Creek Veterinary Hospital at Canyon. "It's the most important part of the program. Without a good mare the success goes way down."

As it is, Veneklasen says across the board, the best folks can hope for is a 70 to 75 percent transplant success rate. That's based on technicians who perform lots of transfers each year — he'll do 150 to 200 annually.

By leasing recipients, though, especially when they're guaranteed for reproductive soundness the way Abraham's are, Veneklasen says the overall cost of ET actually goes down.

With that in mind, Veneklasen says, "This (leasing) has been a great deal for us. I think you'll see others looking to go the same direction."

More specifically, Abraham says the cost-to-benefit ratio of smaller ET centers flushing donors, cooling the embryo and shipping it for transplant to larger centers with access to large numbers of recipients is fast becoming a new business standard.

Furthermore, while Veneklasen says the volume of equine ET remains fairly static year-to-year, economics and recent rule changes by the American Quarter Horse Association (AQHA) may give it a boost.

From an economic standpoint, Abraham says, "More people with 20 mares that they're feeding and paying stud fees on are starting to think they could concentrate on four or five of their best mares with ET, get the same number of colts, but colts worth more money."

Plus, folks propagating Quarter Horses can now register as many foals out of a mare in a year as they can come up with. Until recently, you could only register one foal out of a mare per year at AQHA.

Icing on the cake comes with the fact that systematic recipient management also offers longer breeding seasons to clients. Abra-

ham ships cycling recipients from January 20 until July. Mares naturally cycle from April to September. Abraham buys the extra time by bringing the recipis inside beneath light for several hours each evening beginning the middle of November, which tricks the mares' systems into beginning estrus.

### **Putting wheels beneath the vision**

"The recipient mare program is something we're uniquely set up to do," says Abraham. For one, they have the land resource conducive to running lots of horses. This is big country. Pastures comprised of three and four sections stretch as far as the eye can see across the rolling hills and caprocks.

For another, Abraham has always known his way around horses, plus he's always had a passion for reproductive science—mostly self-taught by the way.

"We got our first stud, booked over 50 mares that first year and had to take a crash course in equine reproduction," explains Abraham. That was six years ago. The volume of mares meant Abraham had to learn the ins and outs of stud collection and artificial insemination (AI) in a hurry.

Now they have their own AI and ET lab on the ranch, and Abraham is the chief technician. He can do it all from semen collection, to flushing mares, to transplanting embryos. But he only does the ET work on his own horses. "If you come to us and want an embryo done, we'll manage the mare for you, but we'll manage them through one of our clients like Timber Creek; otherwise, I'd be taking that business away from them.

"If I can see someone do something one time, I can usually figure it out," says Abraham. He watched Veneklasen do a couple of transplants then dove in on his own horses. "I messed up a couple of times, but learned from there."

Abraham is also a quick

study in business. He leverages his own studs, recipient program and on-the-ranch ET facility by trading services for embryos on some of the top Quarter Horse mares in the nation. "I'll do an embryo for them out of their mare and a stud they select, and provide the recipient," he explains, "In return, the mare is leased to me and I'll do embryos out of the mare and my studs. My studs get exposed to these great mares. I always have a few recipients I can use that I don't feel comfortable sending to clients because of the (mare's) disposition. It's a win-win deal for everybody."

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### ***...systematic recipient management also offers longer breeding seasons to clients.***

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But, the recipient leasing program remains his primary focus. Even if the use of equine ET doesn't increase, the demand for Abraham's recipients continues to rocket ahead. He estimates he'll be running 1,000 recipients — more than twice as many as the current inventory — within the next few years.

"What makes leasing mares from me better is that they don't have to worry about disease. We're a closed herd. They can call and know that I'll have mares for them that will be ovulating within the next two days to a week. The mares are not only healthy and reproductively sound, they're mentally healthy, too.

"Each year we do this, the mares get better and better," says Abraham. "My goal is to have a herd of recipient mares known as an exceptional place to put your embryos. I want people to request our recipients."

They already are — because in this case it's something they want and need. ■