

Norman the Calf

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Against All Odds STILLWATER, Okla.—Born 60 days early, the odds that the calf would survive were slim. According Dr. John Gilliam at the OSU Center for Veterinary Health Sciences (CVHS), calves normally don't survive if they are born more than two weeks before their due date.



Norman, as the premature calf came to be known, is a purebred Hereford bull. He weighed 26 pounds at birth. A normal calf weighs between 70 and 80 pounds. He only had hair on his head and feet—usually a calf has a full coat of hair at birth.

When the calf was born, owner Monte Shockley of Poteau, Okla., realized he was early and much smaller than normal. Shockley summoned local veterinarian, Dr. Joseph DuBois, to examine the new calf.

“I told him he could try to take care of the calf himself or he could take him to OSU,” Dr. DuBois recalls. “I advised him that it would be best to get the calf into intensive care.”

Dr. DuBois is a 2001 graduate of the CVHS’ College of Veterinary Medicine. He has owned and operated the Mountain View Animal Clinic, a mixed animal practice located in Poteau, since 2001.

“Even if the calf’s growth was stunted because he was so small at birth and he didn’t grow to a normal bull weight of 2,000 pounds, if he was fertile, the genetics would still be there to pass to offspring,” Dr. DuBois explains. “Shockley called me the next morning to tell me they were on

their way to Stillwater.

"Norman arrived at the CVHS Large Animal Clinic at the Boren Veterinary Medical Teaching Hospital when he was barely 24 hours old. Dr. Gilliam, Food Animal Medicine Resident, was the veterinarian assigned to the case.

"We have no idea why he was born early," Dr. Gilliam comments. "He did not have any birth defects; however, he did have some pneumonia, which we treated."

For the first three weeks Norman was at the Veterinary Hospital, he received 24-hour care. Fourth year veterinary students working clinical rotations stayed with him in shifts. For two weeks he was on oxygen and IV nutrition. The newborn also required a bottle feeding every six hours. He was under constant watch in case any complications arose.



“He’s a little miracle,” Dr. Gilliam says. “I have been his primary care giver with a group of six to eight students helping. Cooperation hospital-wide has led to Norman’s success. As many as 100 people have been involved with his care at one point or another. From equine medicine to anesthesia to small animal ICU, they have contributed to his growth.”

For his first nine weeks, Norman had to be in a cage to control his movements. His bones were not fully developed. Walking or running on his wobbly legs would risk causing permanent damage before his bones could properly form.

Another hurdle for Norman was his chewing cud. According to Dr. Gilliam, a cow’s cud normally starts on its own. Being born prematurely, Dr. Gilliam had to give him rumen fluid from another cow to get Norman’s rumen started.

The next hurdle staff had to overcome was getting Norman a nurse cow.

“Even though Norman has always nursed well off the bottle, which is one of the reasons he’s alive, we need to get him a nurse cow. It’s common to find a heifer who has either lost her own calf or who is gentle and willing to let another calf nurse to become a ‘surrogate mother’ so to

speak for the needy calf,” Dr. Gilliam explains. “We found a Jersey cow and Norman is nursing and off the bottle feedings.”

Using radiographs, chest ultra sounds and stethoscopes, Dr. Gilliam’s team monitored Norman’s pneumonia. While he may always have some residual effects of the pneumonia, Dr. Gilliam believes it will not affect Norman’s ability to function as a breeding animal. Once he was strong enough to stand, Norman was moved to a larger pen and given time to exercise outside his pen at least twice daily.

Though the odds were high that he wouldn’t survive, the watchful care of Dr. Gilliam, his veterinary students and many others have made Norman a ‘miracle calf’ and a success story the Veterinary Hospital is proud to report. At 12 weeks old, Norman weighed 60 pounds, he frolicked in the halls of the Large Animal Clinic and continued to improve.

“I’m thankful for Dr. Gilliam and his staff. I think anyone else would have given up and they didn’t,” Shockley says. “He grows by leaps and bounds every time I see him.”

Shockley has 60 head of Hereford cattle. Even though he considers himself a “part-timer,” he has had cows all his life. Shockley owns a car dealership in Poteau.

On Dec. 20, 2005, Norman was discharged to his owner and they headed for home in Poteau. At 15 weeks old, the premature calf had beaten the odds and was well on his way to someday fulfilling his expectations as a purebred Hereford bull.

About a month shy of his one year birthday, Norman weighed approximately 600 lbs. and was almost as big as his adoptive mother. He continues to be very friendly, which is probably due to the extensive human handling he had in the early months of his life. Dr. Gilliam expects Norman to suffer no residual effects of his premature birth except for remaining a little smaller in size than if his birth had been normal. An adult Hereford bull should weigh between 1,800 and 2,200 pounds. So between now and Norman's third and fourth years of age, he has some growing to do.

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