

Equine Expertise: Repairing Broken Bodies and Broken Dreams

BY NANCY WEST

Forty years ago, **Scott Palmer, V'76**, and his high school friend, Michael Matz, rode the trails of the Berks Pony Club in Reading, Pennsylvania and dreamed about ways that they "... might actually earn a living by working with horses." Those dreams became reality as Dr. Palmer achieved international recognition as an equine surgeon and Matz became an Olympic rider and a highly successful trainer of performance horses, including Kentucky Derby champion Barbaro.

The two lifelong friends were together again at Pimlico Race Course, Laurel, Maryland, on that day in May 2006 when Barbaro suffered catastrophic injuries during the Preakness Stakes.

"It was an emotionally devastating moment for all of us," recalls Dr. Palmer, who had witnessed the accident from the owner's box at Pimlico. Matz called for Dr. Palmer to come down to the barn area to examine Barbaro. "It was determined that his skin was intact, and we thought that might give us some chance for success," relates Dr. Palmer. "Then I looked at the radiographs along with the Pimlico veterinarians, and saw the horrifying extent of the horse's injuries. It was clear what we needed to do to save him."

Dr. Palmer delivered the news to Matz and Barbaro's owners, Roy and Gretchen Jackson. "The only chance he has for survival is to have the pastern and cannon bone fractures repaired," he told them. "Dean Richardson at New Bolton Center is the best person to do that." With their agreement, Dr. Palmer immediately called New Bolton to make the arrangements, helped splint up Barbaro for the ambulance ride and followed him for the two and a half hour drive where he handed off the horse's care to the New Bolton team.

"It was gratifying to be one small part of the team that gave Barbaro the chance to survive," reflects Dr. Palmer.

Surgical Pioneer

As co-founder and director of the New Jersey Equine Clinic in Clarksburg, New Jersey, Dr. Palmer has made surgical treatment of high performance horses such as

Barbaro the focus of his 30-year career. In addition to individual owners, his clinic serves clientele from regional racetracks throughout the Northeast and mid-Atlantic regions. In 1997, he began an expansion of his clinic with the construction of a state-of-the-art equine surgical facility on a sprawling 130-acre farm with turn-out paddocks. Since that time, the clinic staff has grown from five to 25 employees who annually care for approximately 3,000 horses, referred by veterinarians throughout the mid-Atlantic and Northeastern regions of the country. Dr. Palmer's surgical staff includes Patricia Hogan, V'92 and Jennifer Smith, DVM, who completed her surgical residency training at New Bolton Center.



Scott Palmer, V'76, Opportunity Scholarship student Taryn Gassert, V'07, and Charles Raker, V'42. Photo by Sabina Louise Pierce.

"We've been blessed with the opportunity to treat some really great horses," says Dr. Palmer. "It's a thrill to see them come back from a problem and do well at the race track. Over the years, we develop relationships with the owners as they come to us with problems and broken dreams, and it's very gratifying to be able to help them as well as their horses."

Dr. Palmer is world-renowned for his studies in equine sports injuries and for pioneering equine surgical techniques in arthroscopy, laparoscopy and minimally invasive surgery using lasers. He was one of the earliest

veterinarians to perform joint arthroscopy and one of the first to perform transendoscopic surgery with lasers in the upper airway of horses. In addition, he pioneered a laparoscopic procedure for removing ovaries from mares.

Dr. Palmer credits the time he spent working as a student with Dr. Al Merritt in New Bolton Center's research lab with inspiring him to develop new surgical techniques. "I felt very fortunate to spend two summers at New Bolton learning from great people like Dr. Merritt who got me excited about doing research and trying new things," he recalls. "Dr. Charles Raker and Dr. Loren Evans were also pivotal in steering the course of my career. Dr. Raker was a role model for me when I was a student and he continues to be one for me today."

Giving Back

"I'm grateful for the opportunities that veterinary medicine has afforded me and have tried to give back," says Dr. Palmer, who has a long tradition of volunteer service to the profession. Currently, he is the immediate past president of the American Association of Equine Practitioners (AAEP). He has also served as president of the American Board of Veterinary Practitioners and the New Jersey Association of Equine Practitioners, as well as a board member of the New Jersey Veterinary Medical Association.

"As president of the AAEP, I had the rare opportunity to advance the health and welfare of horses worldwide by expanding the availability of continuing education programs to veterinarians throughout the world," notes Dr. Palmer. Under his leadership, the first AAEP online continuing education courses were offered in partnership with the Veterinary Information Network and AAEP proceedings were made available worldwide through the International Veterinary Information Service. He also enabled AAEP speakers to participate in the annual congress of the the Federation of European Equine Veterinary Associations.

Opportunity Scholarship

Dr. Palmer has also established the New Jersey Equine Clinic Opportunity Scholarship to benefit Penn Veterinary School students interested in pursuing a career in equine practice. "We recognize the significant financial burden that veterinary students must bear in order to complete their professional education," says Dr. Palmer. "In addition to reducing that burden, we established this scholarship to encourage more students to consider equine practice in particular."

The first recipient of the New Jersey Equine Clinic Opportunity Scholarship is Taryn Gassert, a University of Delaware graduate who hails from the Reading area and belonged to the same Berks Pony Club where Dr. Palmer and Michael Matz rode as teenagers.

"Taryn has visited the clinic a few times and it's great having her," notes Dr. Palmer. "That personal contact between the sponsor and scholar is one of the things that makes the Opportunity Scholarship program so enjoyable. It's rewarding to get to know and mentor a student as well as help financially."

Dr. Palmer hopes to encourage more students to pursue equine practice.

"In the past, it used to be a one-person show where you were working 24/7, but that's changed dramatically with group practices. Now equine practitioners have a lot more time for family and a balanced lifestyle as well as a rewarding career."

Summing up his own career, Dr. Palmer says, "My personal philosophy is to leave the world a better place than you found it. Whether it's building a new clinic to raise the level of care we can provide locally or advancing the profession nationally and internationally through associations like the AAEP, that's what I've tried to do. When you look back in the rear view mirror, it's important to be able to say, 'Well, I pretty much like the view.'" ■

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