

Racetrack Veterinarian to VMAS President: The Purse Goes to Penn

by Joan Capuzzi Giresi, C'86 V'98

When it comes to tapping into his clinical instincts, to thinking through a case, Penn gave racetrack veterinarian **James V. Stewart, V'68**, the inside track. In return, Stewart, the new Veterinary Medical Alumni Society (VMAS) president, has given Penn his steadfast devotion.

He hopes his loyalty will be contagious: "It's part of my job to pass this spirit on," says Stewart, who began his two-year term in May.

Stewart credits Penn for helping him develop his medical intuition. Stewart recalls **William B. Boucher, V'40**, professor of medicine, who told him, "You only see what you look for and that looking involves using all of your senses."

Stewart ticks off several examples: the infections that can be diagnosed—by smell alone—the moment you enter a stall. The numerous orthopedic lesions he has characterized without an x-ray. The many tentative diagnoses he has made—and proven correct—in contradiction to what a client had insisted was the malady.

"If you take a thorough history and use your eyes, ears, and hands well enough, you can figure out what is going on," Stewart maintains. "It's very easy as a veterinarian to have your clients direct you," he says. "You have to direct them.... You can do this best when you know the case better than the owner does."

Stewart himself needed little direction in finding his equine calling. It would seem like destiny: His father emigrated here from Ireland by stowing away with a load of horses, and eventually became a horse trainer. His mother was one of the first women licensed to train racehorses in this country. The two met through the industry, married, and raised Jim on a sprawling Thoroughbred farm in Elkton, Md. Stewart's maternal grandfather had a livestock farm adjacent to his parents' spread, which was among the first breeding facilities in Cecil County, Md., now a hub for racehorse breeding.

An only child, Stewart was a constant hand on the farm. With his father out of town training for much of the year, he did everything from muck stalls to foal-watch in springtime.

His mother, whom he respected and adored, had a keen intuition about animals, from the ever-present Chesapeake Bay retrievers the family kept on the farm for hunting and as

pets, to horses. "You didn't even bother arguing with her about what she thought the horses were thinking," Stewart chuckles. "She was always right."

Although he was surrounded by veterinarians both on the farm and at the track, Stewart never aspired to become one. "My expectations weren't high enough to seek that," he says. "But I always knew I was going to work with horses. There was no question about that."

Stewart figured he would run a breeding farm or become a trainer. Although he was a good student at Archmere Academy, a top prep school near Wilmington, Del., he had no plans to attend college. When he shared his career plans to a high-ranking racing official he knew, the older man encouraged him to pursue veterinary medicine.

After that talk, Stewart began to see his world differently. He enrolled at the University of Maryland, where he took his pre-vet courses through the College of Agriculture. His advisor there suggested he take the agriculture courses that were required at the time by many veterinary schools. He refused, since they were not required by Penn, which was the only school to which he intended to apply.

"Every veterinarian I knew who was terrific went to Penn," says Stewart, who was acquainted with many icons in the fields of equine reproduction and general medicine.

One of just a handful of students in his class accepted after only two years of college, Stewart had to play "catch-up" in courses like physiology, histology, and embryology, which his fellow students had already taken at the undergraduate level. But that wasn't his only obstacle: His father died suddenly in February of his first

year, leaving him to shoulder a lot of the responsibility at home. Well on his way to flunking out of school, he eventually told his mother he had to stop coming home on week-ends to work on the farm.

Stewart remembers his clinical years with fondness. Although he never faltered in his desire to enter the field of equine medicine, he acknowledges having acquired many of his fundamental skills, particularly in fields like surgery and anesthesia, by working with small animals during school. "I had a great appreciation for small animals, and still do," says Stewart, who, along with his wife, small-animal veterinarian **Brenda Lewis Stewart, V'70**, breeds and shows American Kennel Club champion Chesapeake Bay retrievers.

Following graduation, Stewart stayed at Penn for an internship and a residency in large animal surgery. He remains effusively grateful for the first-rate training he received from faculty members with whom he worked closely at New Bolton Center, such as **Dr. Jacques Jenny**, professor of orthopedic surgery, and, in particular, **Charles W. Raker, C'41 V'42**, Lawrence Baker Sheppard Professor of Surgery.

Of the Penn faculty, he wistfully

recalls, "They were absolutely great, selfless, giving teachers with complete devotion to what they were doing. They were individuals who epitomized how people should be and how they should treat other people and animals. And they passed that on to the students and residents."

After his residency, Stewart joined a

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Dr. Stewart with two of his beloved Chesapeake Bay retrievers, Red and Cal.

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racetrack practice in Laurel, Md., where he remains today as a partner. The seven-doctor practice, since renamed Yerger, Stewart, Vallance and Associates, covers all the tracks in Maryland and one in Virginia. Although his hours are excruciating—on the track by 5:00 in the morning for training and sometimes there through dinnertime, after the last race has ended—Stewart, 59, prefers track work to anything else.

“Racehorses are nicer to deal with than someone’s spoiled riding horse,” he declares.

He is less complimentary of some of the people in the industry. Racing, says Stewart, who holds an appointment to the Grayson Research Jockey Club Foundation, which funds research in equine medicine and surgery, has suffered from “the desire of a small-but-significant group to beat the system” with banned performance enhancers like sodium bicarbonate “milkshakes” and analgesics.

For the racing industry, Stewart hopes a more enlightened attitude about which medications and supplements should and should not be permissible will one day prevail. He also wants to see meatier purses so that, in the future, the horses might be housed in healthier accommodations offering better ventilation and sanitation.

For the sphere of equine medicine, Stewart’s wish is far more modest—that people will continue to enter the field. Because of the demanding lifestyle and lean salaries, horse medicine is losing warm bodies. In fact, Stewart’s own practice has difficulty recruiting veterinarians.

As VMAS president, Stewart wants to boost alumni involvement in the Opportunity Scholarship Program, a scholarship-mentorship program that pairs alumni donors with recipient students. He notes that many patrons have found the program, which graduated its first class in 2002, personally rewarding and a great opportunity to interact and gain understanding of the problems and goals of new graduates.

In order to update the School community on the proceedings of the VMAS Executive Board, Stewart will pen a President’s Letter in each issue of *Bellwether*.

“I want to let people know they can play a role, make a contribution, and get satisfaction out of it,” says Stewart, who, along with wife Brenda, has been an Executive Board member

for much of the past decade.

This sentiment, he says, also extends to the students, from whom he hopes to stir greater VMAS participation. Among Stewart’s goals is to arrange productive interaction and information exchanges as outreach efforts geared toward instilling students with a stronger sense of dedication to the School.

“The students really have no idea what the School does for them, getting them scholarship money, working with the state legislature to defer their costs...,” he explains.

Stewart also aims to incorporate both past and future graduates of the internship and residency programs, who do hold alumni status, into the Penn community once they leave.

Of Stewart’s hefty sense of commitment to the School, outgoing president **Eric M. Bregman, V’95**, says, “Jimmy is probably one of the most motivated alumni that I know, one of the School’s finest boosters.”

To this, Stewart would probably reflect on his Penn education and say that he’s just returning the favor.

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