

Theriogenologist of the year

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I appreciate our Clinical Theriogenology editor, Dr. Robert Youngquist, for allowing me to provide the text of my acceptance of the Theriogenologist of the Year Award. This format enables me to expand on my original comments in a couple of important ways. I can thank specifically those that nominated me or supplied supporting information for the selection committee. It also allows me the opportunity to edit out mistakes or embarrassing faux pas. Thus the following is not an exact transcript of my talk, but instead reflects perhaps a better version of the feelings I wished to convey.

First of all I would like to thank those that placed my name in nomination for this (Drs. Augustine Peter, Dwight Wolfe, David Hardin, Mike Thompson, and Peter Ryan), the awards committee, the ACT board and especially Universal Ultrasound for their sponsorship of the award. Despite being someone who believes that he doesn't necessarily need a lot of external validation, I am nevertheless very honored by this and I cannot tell you how encouraging this recognition is to me coming now, at the midpoint juncture of my career. Seriously, to best describe my feelings, specifically those experienced upon receiving the call from Dr. Kasimanickam, I have to use a term from my Christian faith—the simple word—“Grace”. Of course it has supreme significance to me in that context, but quite simply in a general context—Grace is defined as “unmerited favor” or “an undeserved reward”.

Now, following notification from Ram, I was contacted by Dr. Franz with some specifics—which include this address—time limit 20 minutes, topic to be of my choosing—a biographical sketch OR a summary of my achievements OR an overview of my research; perhaps impart some wisdom. I quickly realized I could do all of this and still have time to spare.

Born in Paducah, KY; our family lived in a suburb outside of Chicago for a few years. My Dad despite a promising business career held a strong desire that he rear his boys in a rural setting, preferably in the south, so during my third grade year we moved south to Brandon, MS. I had a horse, bird dogs and at different times dabbled in cattle, hog raising ventures. I also worked for our local veterinarian—Clyde Taylor. I attended Mississippi State for my undergraduate requirements and then Auburn for veterinary school. While I am now employed at Mississippi State and both hold special places in my heart I will forever be held by the sway of Auburn, both as a place and as a time in my life and this is an appropriate spot to acknowledge my professors at Auburn to whom I owe so much – Doctors Donald Walker and Robert Hudson, John Winkler, Harold Kjar, an instructor who had returned from practice for a PhD, Howard Jones, Ram Purohit and a young newly minted faculty member named Bob Carson who arrived as I was starting my Beef Theriogenology rotation. All of these guys were great veterinarians and teachers, but Dr. Hudson was my favorite. In fact, I so wanted to emulate Bob Hudson, that I have often thanked the Good Lord that Dr. Hudson was not a chicken veterinarian or a pathologist.

Now during a quarter break in the fall of my senior year, I headed off with a classmate, James Fullerton to visit clinics where we might arrange our preceptorships and perhaps future employment. My focus was central Tennessee and mixed practices that were predominantly large animal. We also visited practices in North Alabama as we headed back to Auburn and when we stopped in Cleveland, AL to say hello to Steve Stewart, who had finished one year ahead, he suggested that instead of heading back to Auburn through Birmingham we detour and go to Oneonta and visit the practice there. Now there are four ways in which you can enter Oneonta, AL—Hwy 75 east or west or Hwy 231 from the south or north—from the vantage of the first three it appears to be much like any other small town, but coming in from the north, as I did—coming off a hill (I later found out was called Shuff Mountain) looking down on this beautiful hamlet-like town of Oneonta is a memory forever etched in my mind. The county, technically in the foothills of Appalachia, still has several covered bridges. We stopped by the Animal Hospital of Oneonta, owned by Ed Murray and the late Charles Payton, they offered me a job and I worked for them for the next four years. They were both great veterinarians and mentors. The little town of Oneonta, Alabama was also the setting for my all-time best achievement. Several years ago I first heard the term

“trophy wife”—I learned that it refers to a beautiful, accomplished, intelligent mate—I guess you could say the whole package. Anyway I can proudly say that I procured a Trophy Wife on the first try. I’d like to introduce her and also share the obligatory family pics (children- Molly, McRae, Tricia & her husband- Caleb Butts. The next two slides are the grand kids- Abigail, Joshua, & Ella).

Now my practice time was doing what I loved, a mixed “country” practice. I had some wonderful clients and, of course, some “not so wonderful” ones as well; but through the rear view mirror and with the passing of time; it was a great experience. Bulls with seven-day-old preputial wounds, 23 year old mares with cervixes that it seemed you could walk through, and cows with near circumferential uterine tears were all frustrating cases, but great teachers. I guess my best and coincidentally my worst trait seems to have always been a ridiculous and common sense over-riding form of optimism when it came to the intersection of a tough case and my perception of my ability. On the financial side of things, my business plan of achieving a professional income was dependent on working 75-80 hr weeks-which meant 100+/week from March- June. We (Donna more than me) were active in church and community; although a lot of those things and more importantly family time, things like vacations or attending my children’s activities; seemed always erratic. So, after almost 15 years of practice, when I received a call inviting me to visit Mississippi State about an extension position, it seemed like a good idea.

Working only 45-50 hours a week at Mississippi State, in addition to allowing more family time, also allowed me the time to prepare to sit our boards through the alternate route. Dr. Fred Lehman was my mentor and in addition to him, I need to thank Drs. Tom Bailey, Bruce Clark, Chuck Estill, and Al Rathwell for their help and advice; advice which many of you of my vintage heard- “read Roberts, read Ginther’s books, read all of the SFT proceedings, Morrow’s Current Therapy is a good overview- be sure and read it”. Also, during this time my friend Herris Maxwell introduced me to Gary Greene, who was also preparing to take the boards. We exchanged notes, etc and I am appreciative of the help he provided as a “study partner”.

Now during the fall of 1994, a few things happened that impacted the trajectory of my career. Filling in for someone, on an equine rotation teaching laboratory, a student mentioned that it looked like they would graduate without learning to palpate a mare. This spurred me to action and with Rathwell and Estill, we organized an elective, which we actually ran with the help of Dr. Doss Brodnax, a retired ag econ professor that had 28 mares that he was breeding to a jack. I could now spend 3-4 hours regaling the sort of mayhem that ensued on a daily basis associated with this activity and I also could explain why I have a complete understanding as to how the name “Jackass” could come to have a derogatory meaning, but needless to say we began producing some veterinarians with good reproduction skills, some of whom are now in our group. Now in my role as an extension veterinarian, I was still speaking at 30-40 cattlemen’s meetings/yr and several county agents contacted me to start doing meeting for their horse owners. I hit the road on that and spoke primarily on reproduction topics, which in retrospect amounted to a series of statewide infomercials. To summarize the next two years-we saw an equine theriogenology caseload that went from 100 to 900/year and I moved down to a clinical teaching position. We started a residency program and something else that had a significant impact on my career occurred, the arrival of Peter Ryan. We began collaborating on mare projects; fescue toxicity, placentitis, and fetal maturation. We not only incorporated the research into the residency/graduate program, but also involved the students that were taking the equine reproduction elective.

The first residents, I personally recruited from practice and they were Jack Smith and David Christiansen, followed by Kevin Walters and Joy Mordecai. All were Mississippi State graduates with Jack, David, and Kevin later joining our faculty. Two more Mississippi State graduates, Heath King and Craig Easley stayed on for internships and residencies; with Heath also joining our faculty. Other residents coming through our program were Renee Jaklitsch, Rana Dutta, and Kathryn Bass.

Most of these guys had heavy equine interests, which allowed me to return to an emphasis on beef cattle. That and with Peter’s ascendancy into the ranks of administration (Dr. Ryan is now an associate provost), have resulted in a different direction in my research focus, as well; bull fertility and fetal programming projects with DVM-PhD graduate student-Amanda Cain. Which brings me to the present.

So, the Theriogenologist of the Year Award, based on the description from our website, informs one that it recognizes recent activity (not lifetime but instead from the last five years), so I suspect the basis for this honor would be service on the Society for Theriogenology and Therio Foundation boards, and also the publication of *Bovine Reproduction*. Well I would like to discuss the book and how that transpired some, first because I am very proud of it and because I believe the process provided me some insight on a few things. The aspect I am most proud of and inversely so humbled by, was the support I received. Several of the contributors, for example Maarten Drost, Al Barth, Dwight Wolfe, and several others had either retired or were near retirement and had no likely personal (career related) motivation to participate in a project such as this, other than the completely altruistic desire to be of assistance to me as well as gifting our profession with their insight, experience, and knowledge. Many of the people in this room, all very busy, took time to help create the book. Thank you so very much.

Now, what would I like to share? What did I learn? Would I undertake something like this again? Was it more involved, more effort than I thought?

Well, I'll begin with a quote- one that I will ascribe to myself: *"There is a certain virtue to be found in fool-hardiness. There are so many things that would go undone if a rational assessment of the real cost & effort necessary to complete the task was done beforehand."* I'll let you decide if that's wisdom or a rationalization.

Either way this train of thought was perhaps better and more succinctly stated by my favorite author-Malcolm Gladwell, columnist for the New Yorker, in a question *"Is ignorance an impediment to progress or a precondition for it?"*

So yes, while I routinely questioned the wisdom of embarking on the "I'll edit a text", and most often during the hours of 10:00 PM and 3:00AM, I'm now glad that I didn't let reason/wisdom/common sense or a realistic appraisal of the necessary work; stand in the way of this effort. So, insight gained from this, would not necessarily be *"Leap before you look"*, but sometimes you need to bet on yourself and take a chance.

An experience many of us have endured as a veterinarian that helps with a project like this is that late spring, summer fetotomy. The foal, dead of course, and you are thinking, after two to three hours of drudgery, arms/shoulders cramping or numb, that it looks likely the mare might not make it either and then you think-"I'm not giving up, I'm not going to quit". Well, I had that feeling sometimes with the book. So, just plain *"not giving up"* is a habit that comes in handy sometimes.

With respect to my next advice I will relate some thoughts on our veterinary school at Mississippi State in 1993 when I arrived. Faculty turnover, reoccurring budget issues, and even after being in existence 15+ years there were still legislative threats of closure. Not the place to start a career, build a program? Right? Well with every disadvantage there are usually pluses.

For one thing, the turnover of faculty, allowed me to make a transfer from an extension position down to the clinics. A transition like that after three to four years if possible, would in most cases be a death knell for promotion and tenure. But, that was taken under consideration when I went up. I doubt my academic record at the time would have garnered me tenure at most any other college of veterinary medicine. Also, I could focus on students and our referring DVM/client service and building a program.

If you, and this is to the young people in the group: students, residents, junior faculty, or first years of practice; if you are looking for the perfect situation, perfect job; you're going to get discouraged and frustrated. Make your job what you want it to be. Create or transform things. My advice quite simply then- *"Bloom where you're-planted"*.

My final bit of advice, and I'll close on this, comes from my favorite movie quote. It's from the old black and white Jimmy Stewart film *Harvey*. A woman was remarking to Jimmy's character about what a likable, kind person he was, to which Stewart's character replied "my mother once told me that to get on in this world, one had to either be very smart, very clever, OR to be very nice. Well, for many, many years, most of my life, I've tried to be clever. I recommend nice".

I again want to extend a sincere thanks to all of you who played a role in my receiving this award, for attending this ceremony, and Universal Ultrasound, specifically Mr. Peter Brunelli, for his sponsorship of the award.

