Although he’s renowned for his sixth sense with horses, he’s equally adored by the humans who own and manage them.

BY JENNIFER B. CALDER

A solitary pear tree remains, evidence of what was once a vast orchard on a 180-acre farm near Castleton-On-Hudson, N.Y. For nearly 90 years, decades past its expected lifespan, its garbled branches have produced a bounty of pears. Beneath its limbs lie stone markers honoring deceased family members, an acknowledgment of the past while stubbornly thriving in the present.

The boy who grew up on this farm, born about the same time the tree took root, was the youngest of four children by 12 years and the only son. He and two draft horses helped work this land he would later inherit, harvesting hay along with the apples and pears. Those heavy, no-nonsense work steeds were renowned equine veterinarian Dr. John R. Steele’s first exposure to the animal to which he would devote his life.

Like that lone pear tree, the boy, now an 89-year-old man and father of six children, continues to produce and thrive, advocating for the beloved horses under his care and mentoring generation after generation of veterinarians.

“To me, the most important thing about my life is the horse,” says Dr. John Steele. “They are good to me, and I will be good to them. That is my goal until the day I die.”

Steele, Loxahatchee, Fla., was inducted in the Show Jumping Hall of Fame in 2008, and his clients read like a Who’s Who of the discipline: Michele Grubb, Beezie Madden, Anne Kursinski, Margie Engle, Norman dello Joio, Missy Clark, to name a few. It’s more appropriate, however, to list the exceptional horses he’s cared for over the years: Eros, Authentic, Indigo, of Margie Engle’s grand prix horses, swings his head back and forth along the rails of the stall on the HITS show grounds in Saugerties, NY, on a cool summer afternoon, pressing his nose against the bars and blowing a soft return greeting.

It’s taken more than six months to get this meeting with “Doc” Steele. He’s busy. Very busy. Even as time spins him ever closer to his 90th birthday he still works seven days a week because, as he tells me, “Disease takes no holiday.”

As we motor around the show grounds in a golf cart, there are constant interruptions, either from someone waving him down to ask about a horse or the energetic trilling of The Lone Ranger theme song from his cell phone as he answers call after call.

We park near the schooling area, and, as Steele wanders away engrossed in his latest phone call, Sara Cole, his assistant of 10 years and former groom for Todd Minikus, shares, “Doc likes to sit up here by the schooling area. It’s an awesome spot because you see every horse and every person.

“Steele’s willingness to help, superior intellect, and inexhaustible commitment to his equine patients define a career spanning nearly 70 years. “It is a vocation, an avocation and a lifestyle,” he explains.

“To me, the most important thing about my life is the horse. They are good to me, and I will be good to them. That is my goal until the day I die,” he confesses. “I try to instill that in all the [v]eterinarians who work for me. Remember one thing: A horse is a living being that you need to be good to and do everything to make them happy.”

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The Chronicle of the Horse

Dr. Steele (left) is a treasured friend to horses and their people, like (left to right), John Madden, Steve Wagner, Clark Shipley, Emily Galls, and Beezie Madden.

Cortes 'C', Simon, Grappa, Gem Twist, Indigo, Glasgow and on and on, as they are his first priority.

"Just remember, when you are writing this thing, that it is important you know how important the horse is to me," he says, his eyes holding mine, making sure I understand. Only when I nod my head does he break his gaze and return to patting the wiry dachshund curled up on his lap.

This unwavering dedication to the horse is indistinguishable from the rest of his life. John Madden, who has known and worked with Steele for more than 30 years explains, "He is an unbelievably hard worker, but I don't think he considers it work. It's all one. Personal life and business.

"He is just a person of complete excellence all the time," John added. "His standards? He doesn't even think of his standards. They just are. That is just him."

The Beginning

Steele's interest in animals ignited on the family farm, although the circuitous journey leading to his final destination was "more hindsight than foresight."

His father worked as a railroad conductor for 55 years, and his mother, along with a few hired hands, oversaw the farm, which included five cows, the two draft horses and 400 chickens.

He had three older sisters, all of whom graduated from Albany State Teacher's College [N.Y.]. One was the vice principal at his high school. "She taught me, and I was very regimented as to study hours and everything because of her. She was the one influential in my going to Cornell [University (N.Y.)]. She was determined that I was going to go to school some place. If I'd had my way," he confesses, "I'd have probably stayed on the farm, but anyway, I ended up at Cornell."

Life on the farm, with its orchards, birthed an interest in pomology, which he declared as his major, with a minor in veterinary medicine.

"When I got there, I liked the horse care."

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The Price Of A Passion

Behind the offices of the veterinary practice in Cortland, a fairgrounds hosted harness racing.

“Wherever a call would come in about a lame horse, they were told that the office had a young boy working for them that was a specialist with horses, and they’d send me. I didn’t know beans! But I went on the calls, and I soon started learning what was going on,” he says with a chuckle.

It wasn’t long before he became the go-to guy in the Standardbred industry, working for the racing commission in Saratoga during the summers of 1947 and 1948 (pari-mutual betting for harness racing began in 1946) as well as at the historic track in Goshen, N.Y., and at Yonkers Raceway, ultimately being appointed the head veterinarian for the state at that track. Then, Vernon Downs opened in the early 1960s, and soon Steele was moving from track to track, giving up the small animal practice and solely treating horses. This all-consuming passion came with a price. Steele’s first marriage ended in divorce after 14 years and six children: three boys and three girls, five of whom still survive. He lost one daughter to leukemia about 10 years ago, his eyes filling with tears as he shares this.

“We were divorced because of me chasing the horses and not being home,” he confesses. “It was hard. Very hard. “It was,” he pauses, then concludes, “To be a racetrack veterinarian or a horse veterinarian, putting in the hours and the devotion that you have to do, it doesn’t promote a good home life. You’ve got to have a special person who can put up with it, or it just can’t happen. She raised the kids because I was never home. The six kids kept her pretty busy, and she couldn’t follow me [from track to track].”

But Steele doesn’t know any other way. “One of my personal regrets is that things happened with my first wife and family that I was probably the cause of, and I am sorry they happened. It was because of the horses, but, if I were to do it over again, I wouldn’t do anything differently. I had the perseverance and the drive and the whole thing to make things happen.”

He now enjoys a close relationship with his adult children and second wife of 35 years, Suzanne.

“I am closer to my family now than I ever was before,” he reveals. “All of them but one were in Lake Placid with me earlier this summer [for the horse show].”

“My children and 11 grandchildren,” he adds proudly.

The Same Animal, A New Direction

Steele’s foundation of equine education came from his time at the track treating trotters—but the world he came to love was that of elite show jumping.

Near the track at Pompano Park in Florida was a layup facility. In the mid-1960s, the facility began accepting the occasional sport horse yet didn’t employ its own veterinarian. While caring for his track patients, Steele crossed paths with Pam and Michael Duffy along with Michele and Tim Grubb and began treating their horses. His abilities addressing lameness problems

“Getting older is harder than you think,” says Dr. John Steele as he approaches 90 years.

“We always went to the county fairs, “We were divorced because of me chasing the horses and not being home,” he confesses. “It was hard. Very hard. “It was,” he pauses, then concludes, “To be a racetrack veterinarian or a horse veterinarian, putting in the hours and the devotion that you have to do, it doesn’t promote a good home life. You’ve got to have a special person who can put up with it, or it just can’t happen. She raised the kids because I was never home. The six kids kept her pretty busy, and she couldn’t follow me [from track to track].”

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Olympic gold medal rider Beezie. “You with them,” says John’s wife and about horses and what is happening him.”

and that was also what I like about anyway! He was no nonsense and was with a laugh. “I kind of liked him grumpy. I thought, ‘OK, that’s a really this mop of white hair flying through,

ence. He busted in the room and didn’t introduce himself or anything, just

dr. Steele, that he was wasn’t jumping well,” says John. “I had

heard vaguely of Dr. Steele, that he was wasn’t jumping well,” says John. “I had an older dog, and her kidneys were kind of failing, but she was doing good. Doc said there was no sense in putting her down yet and helped me manage her care for another year or so. I kept asking for a bill, and he’d say he had sent it, but I know the girls in his office, and they told me they were told not to send me one.”

Steele says it’s not about ego—he just doesn’t want to do anything wrong by the horse.

“I can’t help them, then I need to either walk away or get somebody that knows more than I do to help. I’m not afraid to say, ‘I don’t know,’” he says.

Steele’s appetite for knowledge is insatiable. “The day you stop learning is the day you die,” he says. “You have to have an ego, but there is a place and time to use it, and you gotta know when. Don’t use it too often, use it when you have to. I have an ego, there is no ques-
tions. When things start going fruity and I know they are going fruity and some-
body is screwing up, I am the first to call them on it.”

He pauses and then continues, “The horse has really made me what I am and gave me the reputation that I have. I’ve had the good fortune of dealing with a lot of good people along the road. You have to have that intuitive insight to look forward to see what you can do. What can I do for this horse that will make him good in the future, not neces-

sarily three days from now? To make this horse better and stay better rather than shoot him and do a short term thing?”

Kursinski has witnessed this “big picture” approach many times since he became her veterinarian around the time of the 1992 Olympic Games.

“He’s very passionate about his veterinary work, of course, but more than that, he’s like a father figure or uncle to me,” she says. “He is someone to talk to, not just about horses but about life. I love his outlook. He’s a great, special human being, and then that carries over, of course, to the horses. He has a true love for the horses and is just a wise, wise man.

“He will share some of his experiences, maybe things about his family or from when he was younger that help

you keep things in perspective,” she continues. “You are trying to qualify for the Olympics, and it’s all going down the drain? Remember what is really impor-
tant to you. Life and family. Yes, of course, he wants us to win, he always wants to win and gives 100 percent to get you to the Olympics or the World Equestrian Games or the grand prix, but he can always see the bigger picture when things aren’t going just right.”

John Steele enjoys spending time with son Jeffrey and grandson Jack, now in high school. PHOTO COURTESY OF JOHN STEELE

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John adds, “Something I think is very important to know about him is yes, he treats Beezie’s grand prix horses and is very professional, but I guarantee if some little girl with a little backyard pony had a problem, he’d make sure that pony got everything it needed just because he loves horses.”

Not Only A Veterinarian, A Horseman

George Morris offers his highest praise for Steele: “I say this of few people. He’s of the old school. He is a real horseman’s horseman. Great horsemen have an innate love and feel for the horses. They are born with it; very few acquire it. It’s hard to manufacture that. He is one of the greats, and those kind of people are few and far between.”

Morris continues, “You couple that with tremendous knowledge, he has enormous knowledge and vast experience along with his innate love for the horse. He’s a very unusual man because he still runs strong, and very few people can keep up with him. That’s because he’s passionate and very single minded. It’s all about the horse and the next horse he’s looking at. He has tremendous passion.”

Trainer Frank Madden compares the two men. “He’s like the George Morris of veterinarians. Dr. Steele is old school. He’s absolutely changed with the times when it comes to veterinary medicine and the technology, but he shoots straight from the hip. His way with people is equally as good as his way with horses. He can be tough, but he always lets you know that he loves you,” he says with a chuckle.

Likewise, Steele appreciates fellow horsemen. “You can pick out a good horseman the first time you are around them by the way the horses act,” he says. “When you handle a horse, you know whether they have been handled properly or not.” He continues, “I think anybody that is successful in the horse business needs a firm background with the horse and, in today’s world, there is so much money that flows into this industry from people that not only don’t have an interest in the horse but hardly know how to spell ‘horse’? They just dump the money in, and because they are putting all that money in, their kids are going to ride. They don’t know how to put a bridle on a horse; they don’t know how to put a saddle on a horse. They just put them on and let them ride. Not all, of course, but some.”

“You have to learn how to read a horse,” he adds. “A horse knows when you are afraid, a horse knows when you are there to help him. Before you touch them, you’ve got to be around them for a little bit and see how they react to things. It’s amazing what you can tell, the first time you look at a horse. You can read them loud and clear.”

Well, he can, easier than most.

His Legacy

Steele’s legacy includes not only the horses that have been in his care but also the veterinarians he has mentored. Dr. Brendan Furlong served as the eventing team veterinarian at every Olympic Games, Pan American Games, and World Equestrian Games from 1994-2012 and has known Steele for more than 30 years. Like Shipley, his connection with Steele began at the Standardbred track where he would often call the elder veteri-
“He is a real horseman’s horseman. Great horsemen have an innate love and feel for the horses. They are born with it, very few acquire it.”

—GEORGE MORRIS

narian when perplexed by a problem. “He’s just a kind person, and he’s a very knowledgeable person, but he’s very knowledgeable in practical ways,” says Furlong. “He can talk to a groen without talking down to them, he can relate to a rider without being condescending, he can talk to another veterinarian without making you feel that you’ve missed something. “He always sees positive things about things in everybody and makes the best out of it which translated—transcended every-thing else—but translated into a person that you really wanted to do business with, have a dialogue with, have a rela-tionship with,” he adds.

Furlong grew up in Ireland and said his father would have been close in age to Steele. “They both grew up needing horses to work the land,” says Furlong. “Horses were a very essential part of their upbringing in that they needed horses to work the land,” says Steele. “It goes back to all of our history. They are born with it, very few acquire it.”

Steele’s forward-thinking attitude extends beyond his interest in the latest technology. One of his associates, Margaret Giorrini, trained Standardbred race horses in her first career. In her early 40s, she decided to become an equine veterinarian. Upon graduation, at the age of 46, she was sought out by Dr. Steele. “Honestly, I had sort of ruled out Steele & Associates. I figured they’d never be interested. I was the first woman they ever hired which, almost 20 years ago, was a big deal. It speaks to who he is. He’s not afraid to try new things, and he’s not afraid to be on the cutting edge of anything, whether it’s technology or anything like hiring a woman—and certainly an older woman!” she says with a laugh.

Like the others, she cites his work ethic and his instinctive aptitude with horses. She says, “He can just look at a horse and pretty much tell you what the problem is. That is a gift.” Beyond these things, however, she declares his most major and lasting contribution is as a teacher: “When you think of all the veterinarians spread out across the United States who have been mentored by him, it’s enormous, the impact he has had.”

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Steele & Associates partner Tim Ober, the USEF show jumping team veteri-narian, officially joined the practice in 2001 but has worked with Steele in some capacity since the mid-90s. “We were going to summarize what he did differently from every-where else it is that he understood the horse as a whole,” says Ober. “He understood how to treat the whole horse before everybody else did. He didn’t rely on a specific gimmick. He didn’t have a specific invention. That is what has always set him apart from the mainstream.

“He’s helped countless veterinarians that had nothing to do with our practice per se, but have had the enthusiasm or ambition to expose themselves to Dr. Steele. If they make an effort, he gives it twice back and,” with emotion Ober adds, “That’s just another aspect of him that is really quite impressive. I think if you were to speak to other veterinarians unrelated to our practice, they’d all have something that they learned from him or some experience with Dr. Steele that impacted them in a positive way and made them grow as veterinarians and maybe as people too.”

And, for the time being, Steele has no plans to stop. “As long as I have proper health and my mind works well and I have the desire, I’ll probably keep doing it on a part-time basis,” he says. “How long will that last? That depends on my health. “Getting older is...is,” he pauses reflec-tively, “Is harder than you think. “Is harder than you think,” he repeats. “You think about the things you’ve done, you think about what you’ve done, how you’ve done it, the whole bit and not being capable of doing what you’ve done? That’s the scary part. But, you know, thank God I’m still here! Thank God I’m able to, as I say in the horse world, I’m still able to aggravate people!”

He adds with a laugh, “Aggravate people and make them think! So, I have my place on earth. I’m not one who likes to sit back and watch. I like to do and be positive. I think that life goes by pretty quick, and you can’t wait too long or you’ll miss a lot.”

Like that sole surviving pear tree on his childhood farm, Steele steadfastly continues to defy age, to thrive and to produce season after season.