

Stephen James Roberts

August 5, 1915 — January 21, 2005

Stephen J. Roberts, Professor of Veterinary Medicine, contributed greatly to Cornell in several capacities over his lifetime. He earned distinction as a student-athlete, as a faculty member and athletic coach, and as an alumnus in private veterinary practice. Born in Indianapolis, Indiana, Steve was raised in Hamburg, New York where his father, Dr. James Roberts, also a Cornell graduate (DVM 1912), practiced veterinary medicine. Steve learned horsemanship in the Buffalo area, where the Knox family had established a polo club that brought players of international caliber to the town of East Aurora. Steve brought his riding skills to Cornell in 1933, where he enrolled in the College of Agriculture and earned a place on the Cornell polo team. While a student in the Veterinary College in 1937, Steve was a member of Cornell's first national intercollegiate championship team, along with fellow veterinary student Clarence C. Combs, Jr. and Tommy Lawrence. After graduating in 1938, Steve married Betty Jane Harris (Cornell '38), and they moved to Kansas State University where Steve taught veterinary medicine and earned a Master of Science degree.

Returning to Cornell in 1942 as a faculty member in the Department of Large Animal Medicine, Obstetrics and Surgery in the Veterinary College, Roberts established himself as a leading figure in domestic animal reproduction and was promoted to the rank of Professor by 1946. Roberts' colleagues regarded him as a prodigious worker who 'did the work of five people', according to his longtime colleague Francis Fox. During his career, Roberts served as chairman of his department twice: from 1965-66 and from 1969-72. Steve authored over 150 scientific articles and wrote what remains the most comprehensive textbook on veterinary reproduction: *Veterinary Obstetrics and Genital Diseases*. First published in 1956, Roberts produced new editions in 1971 and 1986. Generations of veterinary students and researchers from around the world used this book as an encyclopedic source of reference material. What is most remarkable about Steve's writing scholarship is that his productivity did not stop when he left academia to join a busy private practice. Indeed, he produced the third (and best) edition of his book while in practice, and he never stopped making contributions to scientific journals. He published many unusual clinical observations well into the 1990s, when he had officially retired from private practice. He continued to submit letters to the editors of professional journals until near the end of his life.

Steve Roberts was among the first faculty members to advocate for a research component in all faculty appointments. He is acknowledged for his pioneering effort to promote equine research at Cornell. In addition, Roberts played a major role in the establishment of the Cornell dairy cow mastitis control program (now the New York State Quality

Milk Program that is regarded as the flagship program of its type nationwide). He was also instrumental in the Veterinary College's development of a comprehensive nutrition program. Roberts served 13 years on the Judicial Council of the American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA), was a charter diplomate of the American College of Theriogenologists, was an associate editor of *Veterinary News*, and provided years of service to the Cornell Veterinary Alumni Association. He received the prestigious national Borden Award from the AVMA for his research on cattle diseases, the Distinguished Service Award from the New York State Veterinary Medical Society, and the Salmon Award that is bestowed only on Cornell's most august veterinary alumni.

“Once a player, always an enthusiast” (Stephen J. Roberts)

Steve Roberts' accomplishments as a faculty member would fill the lives of most individuals, but Roberts' prodigious capacity for hard work left room for more. For 25 years Roberts served as the coach of the Cornell polo team that he had captained as a student. His scientific approach to training players and horses made Cornell a formidable power in intercollegiate polo from the 1950s into the early 1970s. Cornell teams won eight national titles under Steve's leadership. More important than the victories were the principles of team play, hard work, and sportsman-like conduct that Steve instilled into generations of Cornellians who came to Ithaca from across the globe to study and play polo. Those players became an extended family that helped host visiting teams in social evenings at the Roberts' home after every Saturday night polo game. No Cornell polo player of that era ever forgot the lessons of hospitality and generosity they learned on those evenings with Steve and his wife BeeJay. Roberts was inducted in the Cornell Athletic Hall of Fame in 1990, and in an even greater honor in 1996, into the United States Polo Association Hall of Fame in Palm Beach, Florida. Roberts chronicled the fortunes of Cornell polo in his book: *An Autobiographical History of Collegiate Polo and its Players at Cornell University, 1919-1972 and Beyond*.

Roberts' career trajectory was unusual in that he achieved international prominence as a veterinary professor and scientist, and then retired in 1972 to join his brother in private veterinary practice in Vermont. Known there for his work with large animals, he continued in practice for 21 years. While in Vermont, Steve engaged in many community activities, serving on the board of the local hospital and in other capacities that earned him widespread admiration and recognition. His beloved sport of polo was never far from his mind, and he helped establish the Quechee Polo Club in Vermont that continues today. During this period, Steve spent much time assisting his wife, BeeJay, through a chronic illness that resulted in her early death. In 1993, Steve married Ruth Webb Shipman and

began retirement in Bath, New York. Steve and Ruth enjoyed more than a decade of happy life together, and they were often seen at Cornell functions in the Veterinary College and polo arena.

In the year of Roberts' death the Cornell men's polo team won their tenth national championship, and the women's team captured second place after completing a string of five consecutive first place finishes—evidence of Steve's enduring legacy to Cornell sports and a fitting tribute to the “Dean of Intercollegiate Polo.” Stephen J. Roberts had an extraordinary breadth of interests and accomplishments rarely seen in academia. He was an independent and creative thinker, a pioneer of the specialty of veterinary reproduction, a pioneer of polo at Cornell, and one of the faculty members who made the College of Veterinary Medicine great. Steve Roberts was a towering personality, and we are honored to have known him. We have lost someone quite special.

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