

Perspectives in Veterinary Medicine

A Memorial Tribute to Dr. Charles W. Raker

Editor's Note: There have many tributes to Dr. Raker, the world-renowned University of Pennsylvania equine surgeon and educator who died in February. But this one is different. Sarah Khatibzadeh is a Cornell student who had no direct ties with Dr. Raker until three years ago, when she interviewed him in person as part of an independent study course on the history of equine surgery. She initially contacted Dr. Raker by letter, and he invited her to meet him at his home in Honey Brook, Pennsylvania. "He was incredibly wise and kind," she wrote, "and his stories and his advice were inspiring, to say the least." Sarah's entire interview with Dr. Raker, including the above quote, entitled *A Biography of and Interview with Charles W. Raker, VMD*, was published online on May 25, 2011.¹

Donald F. Smith

By Sarah Khatibzadeh (Guest Author)

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Some people whom are considered legendary have earned that status after death. That is not the case with Dr. Charles W. Raker, VMD, DACVS,² who passed away at the age of 93 on February 16th. Dr. Raker became a legendary equine surgeon and mentor during his illustrious career at New Bolton Center.³ Even after his passing, he remains an ideal towards which all veterinarians should strive, regardless of their specialty and/or species of focus.

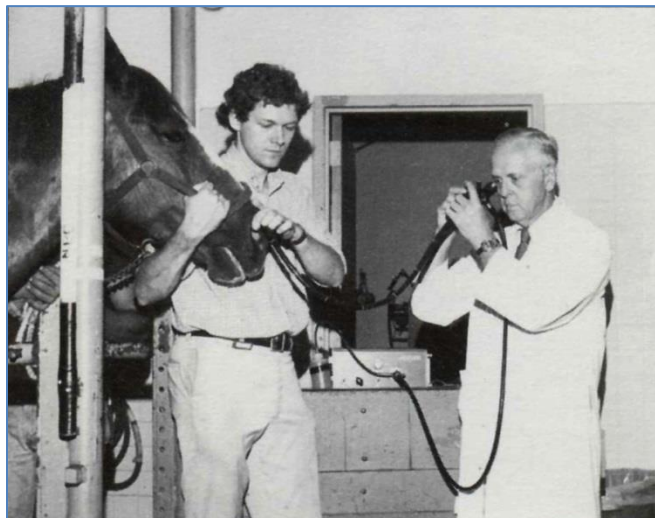
Dr. Raker's contributions to the equine surgery specialty are impressive. He graduated in 1942 at the top of his class from the University of Pennsylvania's veterinary school. After working as a mixed animal practitioner for eight years, he was recruited to practice large animal medicine and teach large animal clinical rotations at his alma mater. In response to the demand for a new large animal surgeon, Dr. Raker rose to the challenge. He became a proficient equine surgeon through practice, supplemented by two weeks of observing Dr. Gordon Danks at Cornell University's veterinary college.⁴

Dr. Raker's development as an expert surgeon required immense dedication and ingenuity, since the American College of Veterinary Surgeons (ACVS) and standardized surgical residency programs were not yet established. He operated in Philadelphia for ten years until the New Bolton Center was established in 1964, and he was largely responsible for establishing the Center as a premier referral center for equine surgery and medicine.



Author Sarah Khatibzadeh, Cornell DVM Candidate, 2014
(Photo provided by the author)

As Raker's reputation as a surgeon grew, so did New Bolton's staff, caseload, and prestige. Though he was a general surgeon for many years, performing some of the early splint and sesamoid bone fracture repairs, he became particularly well-known for his contributions to equine upper airway surgery. Following the development of the flexible light endoscope, Raker documented and treated previously unknown upper airway disorders in the horse, including arytenoid chondrosis. Dr. Raker also frequently performed the more common upper airway procedures, including laryngoplasty (tieback) and staphylectomy (soft palate resection).



Dr. Charles Raker (Right) Examining a Horse by Endoscope
(© University of Pennsylvania/School of Veterinary Medicine)

Starting in the 1960s, Dr. Raker spearheaded the large animal surgical residency program at the University of Pennsylvania. Over the years, he mentored several renowned equine surgeons,

including Dr. Dean W. Richardson, who was to become famous as the surgeon of Barbaro.⁵ From very early in the history of his leadership at New Bolton Center, Dr. Raker advocated for advancement of women in equine practice. He hired Dr. Olive K. Britt, who became the nation's first female large animal surgical resident under his guidance; and mentored other prominent women equine veterinarians, including the late Dr. Midge Leitch, a surgeon, and internist Dr. Catherine Kohn. Through his contributions to the ACVS and his mentorship of both men and women, Dr. Raker improved the equine surgery specialty not just technically, but as a profession.

Dr. Raker also shared his wisdom with those not necessarily interested in equine surgery. Even in his retirement, he advised veterinary students regarding course selection and clinical experience opportunities. He also was the chair of the Opportunity Scholarship Program at the University of Pennsylvania that provided financial aid to deserving veterinary students.

Dr. Raker's contributions to equine surgery extended beyond sports medicine and New Bolton Center. He was one of the original founders of the ACVS and established standardized criteria for large animal surgical residencies. He held several leadership positions within the Surgery College including Board of Regents member, Examination Committee Chair, and President. In 2007, he received the ACVS Foundation Award for his contributions to equine surgery.

Though Dr. Raker's accomplishments as a surgeon and a teacher are remarkable, his capacity for client connections was equally, if not more, noteworthy. He realized that building strong client relationships was essential in ultimately providing the best patient care, and he promoted a service-oriented culture at New Bolton Center from its very beginning. For example, he established the practice of providing reports of diagnostic workups, treatment plans, and costs to owners in addition to trainers. He believed that owners were entitled to this information, as they were actively involved in their horses' athletic careers, and were paying the bills! He encouraged his residents to adopt a service-oriented mentality instead of focusing on, as he sometimes perceived them to be asking, "What's in it for me?"

Dr. Raker's love for his clients was apparent when I interviewed him in his home in 2011. His fireplace, his bookshelves, and his walls were covered with photographs of former patients and their owners. Some of the photos appeared to be over 30 years old. He spoke fondly of each of those patients and relayed their stories to me with the warmth of a parent speaking of their beloved child. Some of his accolades were on his wall, including his 2007 ACVS Foundation Legends Award⁶ and his 2012 AAEP Beyond-the-Call Award.⁷ Yet those awards occupied a minority of his wall space and were not hung in immediately obvious places. It was clear that Dr. Raker's love for his patients and clients was what drove his illustrious career, not just a love for surgery or a desire for fame and power.



Dr. Charles W. Raker at his home in Honey Brook
(Photo by the author, 2011)

In fact, one would not suspect Dr. Raker's status as an elite equine surgeon by speaking to him. During his interview, he was incredibly modest. He described his career path and achievements matter-of-factly, in general terms as often as possible, and without any hint of self-admiration. He also attributed his superb surgical skills to practice and luck. It is difficult to believe anyone could have reached his level of expertise by relying on practice and luck alone. On the other hand, perhaps it was Dr. Raker's modesty that allowed him to develop his gifts as a surgeon, to foster his mentees, and to provide excellent service for his patients and clients.

When I asked Dr. Raker for advice for anyone interested in pursuing a career as an equine veterinarian and/or surgeon, he emphasized maintaining a good attitude and working hard. Dr. Raker lived by this advice. While a practicing surgeon, he attended every annual ACVS Symposium to keep his knowledge and skills sharp, far beyond what was required to maintain his license. That being said, many veterinarians would not reach Dr. Raker's status, even with honest effort and a positive outlook on life. But they would become competent and compassionate practitioners who prioritized patient care and client service. And for that, Dr. Raker would be proud.

¹ Khatibzadeh, Sarah M. A Biography of and Interview with Charles W. Raker, VMD. An Enduring Veterinary Legacy. May 25, 2011. <http://hdl.handle.net/1813/28564>

² Diplomate, American College of Veterinary Surgeons.

³ [New Bolton Center](#) is the large animal clinical, teaching and research facility for the University of Pennsylvania's School of Veterinary Medicine. It is located near Kennett Square, approximately 35 miles west of Philadelphia.

⁴ The New York State Veterinary College at Cornell University was changed to Cornell University College of Veterinary Medicine in the early 1980s.

⁵ Barbaro, the thoroughbred racehorse who won the Kentucky Derby in 2006, then shattered his lower right rear limb two weeks later during the Preakness Stakes.

⁶ [Honors and Other Things. ACVS Legends Award: Dr. Raker](#). University of Pennsylvania Almanac, 54, no. 14 (December 4, 2007).

⁷ Beyond the Call Award. [AAEP Annual Awards](#).

KEYWORDS:

History of Veterinary Medicine
Charles W. Raker
University of Pennsylvania
New Bolton Center
American College of Veterinary Surgeons
Equine Surgery
Olive Britt
Midge Leitch
Catherine Kohn
Sarah Khatibzadeh
Dean Richardson
Cornell University
Beyond the Call Award
ACVS Foundation Legends Award

TOPIC:

Equine Surgery

LEADING QUESTION:

What legendary surgeon was a leader in the development of upper airway surgery in the horse during the 1970s?

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