

# On Call with Dr. Mark Fitch

BY ALLISON SCHULTZ

*"On Call With" is a series in The Horse's Mouth which candidly features Boulder County veterinarians. This series will focus on the featured veterinarian's locality, their vet-life history in the Boulder County area, their favorite challenges in the field, their concerns about horse's and horse care in our area, their personal involvement in horses, and of course, why they chose to become a large animal veterinarian.*

Early on a bitter cold Saturday morning in mid-January, I sat with Dr. Mark Fitch while he waited for calls to come in for the day. While we talked, Dr. Fitch reflected on his life with horses and his career as a veterinarian in Boulder County and kept a careful watch on his new puppy Mac, a gift from his daughter Lindsay for Christmas.

Dr. Fitch has been practicing in Boulder County for 31 years. After graduating from vet school at CSU in 1976, he bought his current property with the help of family and family friends and spent an internship at Littleton Large Animal Hospital before starting up his own practice in the spring of 1977. At the time, he didn't look into the economics of Boulder or the area or the equine demographics. Not knowing anyone in Boulder County could have also proved challenging for a fledgling business, but the local veterinary trade-off group including Dr. Belden and Dr. Neuens provided a solid network of calls and clients to get him started. "I couldn't have landed in a better area," he says looking back at it all. "Now, I couldn't think of moving or establishing a practice somewhere else. I went into this saying, 'I'm going to set up here, and it's going to work.'"

Mark grew up on a ranch in Wyoming into the fourth generation of a family deeply involved in the horse business. "Horses have been in our family forever," he mused as he shared stories of his grandfather's giant herds of horses. "My grandfather had about 400-600 head of horses... When my father moved back to the ranch, he convinced my grandfather that they could make more money raising cattle." Even after downsizing the horse herd, there were still 30-40 ranch horses on the ranch at

any given time, and Mark had about 10 ranch horses for himself. "I tried to do everything on the ranch with horses," he said, revisiting memories. At a young age, Mark became fascinated by horse behavior, by "learning how to do more by doing less." "It is a learned skill to be around the horse," He states. "They understand the world 180 degrees from us. It is important [for us] to learn how they see the world."

When Mark was 10 years old, he began showing in cutting, reining and halter competitions. By the age of 12, he began training outside horses for the public, which became part of the funding for his college education. Later, due to the distance of the ranch, he learned how to trim and shoe horses, which helped pay his way through college. "The horse business has been really good to me all my life," he reflected. "The shoeing experience was great and gave me a better understanding of the horse, how to work under a horse, and how to work with farriers." Currently, Dr. Fitch has 6 horses which he trains and uses for roping and enjoys the jackpot team roping competitions.

Carrying a deep respect for horses, Dr. Fitch made a career choice that focused on these animals and this passion for his work and his patients is doubly strong today. "This has been a good way for me to make a living and do what I need to do to work on the horses. At the ranch, my older brother went back to help my dad, and there wasn't enough room for 3 [of us]. I wanted to work with horses and being a vet was a good option. I like my job. I like going to work; and after 30 years I can still say that."

"What I like about my type of practice is the variety. There are 3 C's that make our living [as vets]: cuts, colics, cripples. But there are so many other facets – pediatrics, emergency issues, dentistry, and preventive medicine – that provide a good mix. We see things a couple times a month that we've never seen before. There are always new things that come along, always a new diagnostic

mystery," he continued. "In the past 30 years, new diseases have developed. And emergencies are always interesting." Some of the emergencies Dr. Fitch has been called to have required more creativity than others, such as the instance in which a horse got stuck in a tressle bridge and they had to get a crane to lift him out. So, when he is asked if being a vet ever gets boring he replies: "Man, if I had a boring day, it would be easy!"

When I asked Dr. Fitch about what he sees as important concerns about horse care in general, he felt that one of the aspects of his service as a vet was informing new horse owners on the nature of horses, especially those who didn't grow up with horses. Vets have the knowledge to give good advice in regards to horse keeping and can teach owners and handlers about behavior, building safe spaces to keep horses injury free, how horses see the world, prevention of disease, and basic medical procedures so they can better care for their animals.

While one in three horses in the US don't receive veterinary care, the Front Range has a higher level of vet care than any other area in the US. "We have a good group of practitioners in our area and we need that much help. We are all more like colleagues than competition because there is such a demand," he said. "The area vets have been good to get along with, [and it's been] a combined effort to serve all these horses. We are above the national average on horse care, which says something about the people in our area: the vets, the owners, the trainers... everyone involved."

"I couldn't have asked for my career to go any smoother. Planning helps, but a little luck didn't hurt," Dr. Fitch said with a smile of gratitude for the horses, the good people and the opportunities that have been plentiful since he moved to the area. "It's been a pleasure to be in Boulder County."

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