The circuitous path of an academic theriogenologist

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How in the world did I get from there to here?

Folks, I wonder nearly every day how I reached this lot in life . . . that of an academic theriogenologist. Certainly the path to my current position was unpredicted by me and nothing short of incomprehensible to the loved ones that that offered guidance during my formative years as an impressionable youngster. I was born the son of a bonifide cowboy and cowgirl.

My parents were rodeo producers that settled in the Ozarks of Missouri near the time of my birth to start up a Wild West show with a variety of other offerings. I reckon it was this very upbringing that inspired my fascination for animals, for I was exposed on a daily basis to an assortment of animals that most youth could only read about in books or visit at the zoo.

From the time I was an infant, my parents immersed me, and my two sisters, in animal related activities. As an infant, I spent much time in an Indian cradle board that was hung in a tree over the watering tank where the horses would water off after the trail rides.
Hope and Tex Varner with Dickson in Indian cradle board

My first steed was a mule, named Harry the Educated Mule, after the President at the time, Harry S Truman.

Dickson on his first steed, Harry the Educated Mule, in the Missouri Ozarks.

My dad was an extraordinary horse trainer and he trained this mule to do tricks and incorporated the mule in the programs at various events.
When I became old enough to ride on my own, I was mounted on Harry the Educated Mule, riding with a bareback rigging while assisting with trail rides that were offered daily. We had up to 30 riders per trail ride and offered these trail rides hourly eight times daily.
Our Wild West show, called the Ozark Stampede, was sight to behold! We had the usual rodeo events, with a focus on rough stock, because calf roping, team roping, and bull dogging (steer wrestling) were not as popular for the general public back in those days. We even had a special national All-Girl Rodeo on one occasion.
Bull riding was excitin'

Calf roping at All-Girl Rodeo

What made the show so spectacular though, was the assortment of specialty acts. My parents partnered with a number of individuals to bring in acts ranging from wrestling bears, to high-wire acts, to jumping horses and mules, to trick horses, to trick roping, to trick riding, to chariot races, to quick draw artists, to whip acts.
Jumping stock rehearsing for rodeo

Trick horses and mules
Zebras, elephants, camels, ostriches, llamas, buffalo, and chimpanzees also made their way into the performances.

My sisters I even performed as the “Ropin’ Rodeo Rascals.” We had stage coach holdups, dog acts, wrestling alligators, wild animal races, and even “scoop shovel” races for the bucking horses that decided to quit bucking for one reason or another. Eventually, these horses made their way into the dude
string for trail rides, and might wind up carrying an 80-year-old grandmother or a 4-year-old child on a trail ride through the Ozarks.

Wrestling alligator  Practicing for scoop shovel race

Probably the most popular act was Jonny River’s High Diving Mules. These critters would dive off a platform high in the air into a tank of water about 8 feet deep. We even had a monkey that would ride a diving pony!

As I got older (about 10 years of age), my dad insisted that I start riding bulls. I told him that I wanted to rope calves, but he shook a rosined bull rope with a bell attached and said “this is the only rope you can make a living with.” I made it through the first few bulls that he loaded in the chutes, and I eventually became hooked on this event. I rode these critters until the weekend before I entered veterinary medical school.
Looking back, I think my youth was quite incredible even though I didn’t fully appreciate it until I became older and could reflect back on my youth. I am so thankful to my parents for providing me with such a unique and adrenaline-charged childhood.

Why I wound up in veterinary school, I can’t rightly recollect. My dad did most of his own “veterinary work” - deworming horses with tobacco, suturing lacerations, and castrating horses. He even had a stomach tube in the barn that he passed into the stomach for administration of mineral oil and castor oil to the occasional horse that showed signs of colic. I remember traveling with my dad to the veterinary college at the University of Missouri when his favorite trick horse, Nugget, had a foul smelling nasal discharge. It was there that I met Dr. Joe McGinity for the first time. Being the showman he was, my dad could not pass up the opportunity to perform some tricks with Nugget, so he had the horse sit down and drink Coke out of a bottle for some of the faculty and students. It was a real hit, and my dad stayed in fairly close contact with Dr. McGinity.

As a third-year undergraduate student at the University of Missouri, I remember passing through the Student Union and spotting an informational booth regarding veterinary medicine. Well, my heart was set on just making the national finals of the Rodeo Cowboy Association in those days, but somehow I picked up an application form that was due the following Monday. I completed most of the form, but had to write a composition on why I wanted to be a veterinarian. Well, I had a rodeo in western Kansas that weekend, so I asked my sweet momma to help me with the letter. When I returned from the rodeo that Sunday, I read over the letter and it sounded so good that I don’t think I changed a thing! In fact, Mom even included several informational brochures on the Ozark Stampede in the application packet. When it came time for my interview with the admissions committee, they pulled out the brochures and only asked me about the high-diving mules, ostrich races, wrestling bears and such! I reckon I owe my acceptance into veterinary school solely to my adoring mother!
Now realize that I had not even worked for a veterinarian prior to veterinary school. As such, I entered the professional curriculum with little idea of what to expect. Nonetheless, I enjoyed all facets of this educational experience. I was especially intrigued with the clinical years, particularly so with my rotations through theriogenology with Drs. Robert Youngquist, Ronnie Elmore, and C.J. “Bush” Bierschwal. It was this experience that prompted me to focus on animal reproduction following graduation. It was also at this time that met my eventual bride, Tricia Anne Wilcox (“Annie”). We married during her senior year of veterinary school and she has stuck by the side of this renegade for the last 38 years! Those of you that know Annie and me, also know that any of my accomplishments are due in large part due to the support and guidance of my beautiful bride! During this time we have begotten two fine young men, Victor and Zack, and now have four grandchildren.

Following graduation, I hit the ground running as an intern at Castleton Farms, Lexington, Kentucky, where Dr. H. Steve Conboy was responsible for molding me into a worthwhile veterinarian. While he had his work cut out for him, I am so pleased that he took the time and effort to give me the opportunity to develop my skills as a veterinarian on a large broodmare farm. I stayed at Castleton Farms for another two years before heading for New Bolton Center to enter a residency program in animal reproduction, primarily under the tutelage of Drs. R.M. “Bob” Kenney, John P. Hurtgen, and eventually Terry L. Blanchard. My oh my, these were such enriching years . . . not only because of the direction and support received from my mentors, but also because I was surrounded by such bright, energetic, and kindly residents like J. Stanley “Stan” Brown, Katrin Hinrichs, and Charles C. “Charley” Love and graduate students like Sue McDonnell. Indeed, I consider the time spent at the University of Pennsylvania as one of the most exciting and inspiring periods in my professional career!

After four years at the University of Pennsylvania (as a resident and then a lecturer), I accepted a position at Texas A&M University in the Department of Large Animal Medicine and Surgery. Dr. Ron Elmore was Section Chief of Theriogenology at the time and was largely responsible for my relocation to Texas to embark on a career as an academic veterinarian. I have been here for the past 30 years, so you can see that I don’t move around too much. My dreams became a reality when folks like Katrin Hinrichs, Terry Blanchard, Charley Love, and Steve Brinsko also moved to Texas A&M University. We aren’t just colleagues, we are family . . . and I can’t envision a more perfect scenario for a professional career!

**Principles for survival in an academic world**

Life at an academic institution can be both exhilarating and maddening. Life sometimes seems to be brimming with exasperating moments, regardless of one’s vocation, but there is something about the
incessant demands for productivity in an academic setting that can wreak havoc with one’s basic quest for both peace and fulfillment. So how does one deal with this conundrum in an effort to shift the equation in favor of exhalation? After 30 years in a tenure-track position within a clinical department at a tier-one research institution, I think that I finally know the answer – surround yourself with brilliant minds that thoroughly enjoy the discipline, e.g., theriogenology; and build a family-like relationship. Enjoy each other’s company at work and engage in extracurricular activities together on a regular basis. Over the course of your career, you will likely spend as many, or more, waking moments with your colleagues as with your immediate family, so do all possible to bring enrichment to these relationships. The end result – you will cherish each other, work as a team to accomplish your goals, and, importantly, you will enjoy coming to work each and every day!

Longevity in an academic veterinarian can be quite fleeting. Many of the obstacles that must be overcome in this “publish or perish” environment have taken their toll on many a fledgling academician. So what, in my view, are the critical tools for making a career in academic veterinary medicine? Well, below, I share my ABCs of Guiding Principles for Survival in an Academic World

Seek Accountability
First and foremost, one should seek accountability for one’s actions, and as an academic leader, to do the same for those under your care and guidance. The saying holds true that no matter how much you love your university, the University does not love you. While this concept sounds both glaring and unemotional, one must realize that the University must also be held accountable for its actions to those providing state resources or private donations for University functions. Bottom line: Git ‘er dun!

Boost confidence
Most of us attended veterinary school to become practitioners. We had little exposure to critical thinking from a scientific perspective, and scientific writing, experimental methods, and p-values were not part of the curriculum. As such, many of us learned this through “on-the-job” training. Today is another era in academic veterinary medicine. Technologic advances are continuingly unfolding and expectations from administrators are unrelenting (see above). As such, we owe it to those that come in behind us to boost their confidence through group meetings to discuss experimental ideas and procedures, review written proposals and manuscripts prior to submission, and recommend further coursework that could strengthen their academic fiber.

Connect with others.
Generally, no one goes their way alone in academia. Collaborations are the key to success. As Will Rogers once pointed out, “No one is as ignorant as an educated man you talk to him about something that he ain’t educated in.” Well, that pretty well sums it up for an academician. We are encouraged to demonstrate more depth than breadth of focus in an effort to advance or professional discipline. We are now in the “-omics” era – genomics, toxicogenomics, proteomics, metabolomics, etc. We in the clinical departments oftentimes do not have formal education in areas such as these, so it is important for us to team up with basic scientists as collaborators, at our institution and at other institutions, to develop strategies for pursuing academic excellence.

Dream with the intention of making it a reality.
Dreams can become reality but this requires steadfast determination and regular meetings with those that share in those dreams. Remember the old adage, success is more dependent on perspiration than inspiration. This applies to any type of livelihood, and is critical to growth in a university setting.

Create an Edge over the competition.
While we like to think of other academic units as those containing colleagues rather than competitors, most of us in academia are probably cursed with a Type A personalities (i.e., ambitious, competitive, outgoing, and occasionally aggressive). As such, we want to be the best that we can be, and to be recognized by others for our ingenuity and productivity. In my view, the best way to create an edge in a discipline is to surround yourself with likeminded individuals that are willing to work diligently together to accomplish lofty goals.
Find your sweet spot and Focus.
Remember, depth of research is more important than breadth of research in the eyes of an academic administrator. To that end an academic veterinarian should pick research and clinical areas that are particularly titillating, and focus scientific efforts to build upon the current knowledge base. I consider it very important for academic clinicians to continually incorporate their research findings in the clinical setting and to expose veterinary students to this strategy. It helps them to become more critical thinkers.

Identify areas of Growth potential.
Clinical research is that which is directly applicable to the clinics and to the animal industry being served. To that end, stay abreast of the visions and projections within the animal industry that you ultimately serve, and immerse yourself within this industry. Become an active member of breed and industry organizations. In this way, you can structure your clinical and research programs such that they have the highest impact on areas of growth within the industry.

Harness and empower those with which you work.
The bottom line – encourage each and every one of your team members to be the best they can be. We all work best when we are given the role of leading an effort, as opposed to simply being directed by others to do a job. Empower everyone around you to be in charge of something. All forty mules in a forty-mule train are equally important in delivering the load.

Show Initiative.
“Actions speak louder than words”. Demonstrate by doing and others will follow. Bring excitement to the table. Positive outcomes rely not only on ability, but also on readiness to accomplish the task at hand.

Don’t be Judgemental.
Each of us is built differently. We have different approaches to accomplishing a goal. We each have different ways of interacting with others. We have different ways of reacting to life’s challenges. Indeed, we are all unique. Relish in the fact that we are all different, and remain cognizant that we are all a part of mankind and have a fundamental urge to accomplish good deeds.

Know the strengths and weaknesses of your people.
How often do we encounter those with no faults? Each of us has definable strengths and visible weaknesses. Each of us has unique capabilities and limitations that are sometimes not recognized by us, but are easily detectable by others. Work as a team to maximize the strengths of each and every person, and build a team with varied strengths, as opposed to one that is replete in a singular strength.

Realize that Leadership is a trust, not a right.
If placed in a position as a leader, lead by example, show compassion for all, and have the best interest of your employees first in mind at all turns. When one becomes dictatorial and leads from behind, accomplishments become few and far between, and chaos will evolve.

Make a positive difference to society and maximize those contributions.
We have accepted a position in academia to advance the care of animals and to be penetratingly involved with the betterment of society. Start your day by asking yourself, “How can I make this world a better place.” That mindset will take you far toward maximizing your individual contributions to society.

Nothing can be achieved alone.
In nearly any facet of life, no one goes their way alone. For progress in academia, collaboration with others is particularly important. Engage with others, contemplate and massage common interests and make plans together to go forward as a team. Capitalize on diverse strengths.

Don’t miss Opportunities (timing is everything).
Advancements are due in large part to captured opportunities. Understand the current needs of the animal industry in which you are engaged. Keep your eyes and ears open for new methodologies and research findings. Examine how advancements in the basic sciences may have application to the clinical arena. Get to know new personnel at your institution, and investigate ways in which they may provide valuable input to your area of interest.
Prioritize correctly.

As we all know, prioritization is a big key to success. What I will point out here is that family and outside interests should not be considered low on the priority list. Escape from work is important to revitalize the mind and invigorate passion in the workplace. Regularly enjoy the things in life that bring you relaxation. Engage in organized sports, go fishin’, embark on camping trips, enjoy the solitude of biking or running outdoors, ride a horse (or mule), raise some cattle, play a musical instrument, or watch new movies . . . just do something that you enjoy immensely on a regular basis.

Avoid Quarrelsome situations, but encourage debates.

Disagreements are a simple part of life, both at home and in the workplace. Disagreements can be healthy as they bring more intensive study to effect resolution. Don’t shy from away from differences in thought. Meet to discuss divisive issues and focus on ideas and productive debates rather than personality traits. Put simply, work together. Speak up, but respect your colleagues. Resolve conflicts in a rational way.

Be more Relational than positional.

The phrase, a chain is no stronger than its weakest link, fits well in the academic community. Healthy relationships are vital to the strength of a group or organization. Institutions are replete with hierarchical structure and, in my mind, this can be problematic if not handled correctly. Leaders should focus on being more relational than positional – building upon the strengths of personnel and engaging all employees in a positive and supportive manner. A positional stance on matters can be disparaging to those with which you work and this can lead to ambivalence or even apathy. The result is highly destructive to both efficiency and output.

Step forward to meet challenges.

It may be important to back down from a fight, because the outcome is generally negative for all involved; however, never back away from a challenge. Challenges bring opportunities, and opportunities can bring growth and success to a program.

Encourage Teamwork.

I have addressed teamwork many times above, but must include it one more time. It is a term that deserves to “stand alone.” We cannot singularly make progress to the same extent as that which involves interaction with colleagues. Multiple minds are always far brighter than any single mind. Embrace this concept and relish in the fruits that can be derived from its application to life.

Create Unification of thought.

A team approach is critical to innovations and progress, but the team-approach concepts requires regularly scheduled meetings of the minds to establish unification of thought before implementing strategies. Where possible, meet as a group prior to examining a clinical patient or executing a research project so that all have had an opportunity to inject their thoughts regarding approach to a case or experimental design.

Match Vision with Values.

The term, vision, seems to be the buzz word for administrators nowadays. Vision is important for execution of missions and paths of focus, but vision must be paired with shared values to be effective. Dream dreams and envision the path to success, but also delve into the mechanisms by which to accomplish your goals. All decision making regarding implementation of strategies should be based with core values foremost in mind.

Walk the halls slowly.

How often do we pass someone in the hallways or on the sidewalks that is traveling fast with their head down when we pass by them? We live in a fast-paced society and, in academia, time management is a key component of efficiency and success. Nonetheless, we need to “stop and smell the roses” more often than not, to engage in pleasantries and conversations with those that we rarely communicate, to meet someone new each and every day. Life is fleeting. Take a deep breath, enjoy the companionship of others . . . maybe we can slow life down just a little bit.
Make sure that ideas pass the X-Ray test before implementation. I incorporate this thought particularly as it relates to research endeavors. Each of us has thoughts regarding new research projects. We may have come up with an idea after reading a manuscript, or maybe something popped up out of a dream that we had the previous night. Whatever the origin of a new research thought, it is important to familiarize oneself with the related literature and meet in a group setting to deliberate the strengths and weakness of a project, understand the intended impact of the study, and massage experimental methods. The best way to begin an experiment is not in the laboratory, but in a closed room with a marker board to hash out all the details associated with the experiment. Don’t begin the project until you are satisfied with the approach.

Visualize how you will be defined at the end of your professional career. All of us in academia want to be remembered for our accomplishments. Accomplishments can take various forms . . . number of publications, quality of publications, impact on trainees . . . the list goes on and on. Early in your career, select that which is most important to you and stay the course throughout your professional life. Remember, we are generally remembered for what we have done for others; not what we have done for ourselves.

Get in a zone and be zestful. Become feverish about that which you engage. I had to end with a double-Z! To be productive, we can’t be all things to all people. We have selected a profession in academia that provides us with the ability to specialize. So specialize in a discipline that brings you utter excitement (i.e., get in a zone). Become involved in an a specific area that makes you think “Wow!” every morning that you head to work (be zestful). Excitement begets contentment!

Conclusions
So there you have it – my background and bits of philosophy, all in one bundle. However, I don’t know that I qualify for discharging pearls of wisdom. Dr. Thomas Armstrong, author of “The 12 Stages of Life,” proposes that it is not until one reaches 80+ years of age that he/she represents a source of wisdom! Therefore consider the above to simply be mentorship-related thoughts. I reckon my position all along was to simply play a minor role as part of a much greater whole . . . that of veterinary medicine, veterinary medical education, theriogenology, and most importantly, humanity.

I thank the Society of Theriogenology immensely for bestowing upon me such an admired and respected award. My most enduring friendships emanate from my interactions within the Society of Theriogenology and the American College of Theriogenologists. While I have many outside interests and affections, the discipline of theriogenology is my professional lifeblood, and the pulse of the Society and College beats within me each and every day!