

NEVER TRUST A SNEAKY PONY

“You’d like this book
even if you just had
a pet butterfly.”

— Buck
Brannaman



And
Other Things
They Didn't
Teach Me in
Vet School



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College for most people is about four years. While most veterinarians finish the entire curriculum in about eight years, I artfully squeezed mine into twelve. I wanted to specialize, so I took a little extra. The truth is they can't teach you how to be a veterinarian in just eight years. All they can do in that short amount of time is teach you how to pass the board exams so you can be real dangerous for about twenty years trying to learn how to be a veterinarian. Mom always told me I was special. That's why it took me twelve—twelve of the most difficult, challenging, maddening, delightful years of my life. I'd do it all over again in a heartbeat. This chapter will give you a taste of why.

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The most common orthopedic problems in horses start with feet. This chapter outlines a typical day in vet practice, along with the symptoms of hoof disease, the process of diagnosis and treatment, and the outcome of our efforts. Most of the stories I've included end with interesting twists that are the nature of equine specialty practice and the crazy people involved with horses—and the reason I wrote this all down. You can't make this stuff up!

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The term “horse trader” conjures up characters that are often associated with some of God’s less-than-noble children. While most people are basically honest, some horse traders are a little bipolar in the integrity department. And, amazingly, some buyers sorta fall into the mindset: “A lie is not a lie if the truth is not expected.” So “buyer beware” applies to the purchase of just about anything with four feet—especially horses.

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– Delbert, the Cow Shoes, and the King Ranch

One evening I was talking with a friend about the anatomy and function of the equine foot. This fellow had a horse with navicular disease that had failed to respond to several attempts at treatment.

“Nothin’ short of a foot transplant is gonna help ‘im, Doc,” my friend said with a discouraged tone. “How come a horse don’t have a split foot like a cow? That way, if he went lame on one side it would only hurt ‘im half as much!”

This sounded pretty good to me because I had been frustrated by chronic lameness before. Actually “curing” many such patients is unrealistic. Sometimes the best we can hope for is the ability to manage the problem and keep the horse comfortable enough to do his job. I had thought that it would sure be handy to be able to transplant feet, but I had not thought about the possible advantage that cattle had with split feet to spread the load out over a larger surface area.

The bovine foot is cloven, or split, from the fetlock (ankle) down. Instead of having just one digit, like the horse, the cow has duplicates of all three phalanges, along with the associated tendons and other soft tissue structures. The analogous structures in humans are found in the hand. The fingernail is our hoof. The underlying bone, the third or distal phalanx, is like the horse’s coffin bone. The middle knuckle is equivalent to the short pastern bone, and the next one toward the main part of the hand is like the long pastern bone or first phalanx.

The horse stands on his “middle finger” (or “freeway finger” as my friends in town call it). But the cow stands on his “middle” *and* “ring finger.” This provides a fairly efficient way to distribute the weight of the cow over a wide surface. I would guess, however, that it is not the best design for sustained speed, seeing as given enough space, even a slow horse can outrun most cows.

Every time I think of the cloven-footed construction of cattle, I think of my Uncle Delbert. Not because he was a brilliant anatomist or gifted bovine surgeon, but because he had a real novel use for a set of bovine feet.

Delbert is a retired chemist, school teacher, and real estate broker, and one-time mayor of a small town in South Texas. It’s not that Delbert can’t keep a job,

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it's just that he is a man of many interests (or maybe just a short attention span... nobody in the family is quite sure). Many families have a metaphoric "crazy aunt with three hundred cats." Delbert was ours—without the cats.

To know my favorite uncle, you'd have to go way back. I guess he was a favorite from the time he was born. He was the youngest of four children, thus, "the baby"—a position he used well for most of his life. As a young man, he wasn't really a "bad guy" and he surely believed in rules—he just believed they applied to everybody else, not him. As a teenager, he loved hot-rod cars and had no trouble keeping them full of gas at the expense of the local oil refinery. He apparently had developed a useful, if nefarious, skill of picking locks, and this provided an almost unlimited source of gasoline from a place he called "Midnight Gas." But he loved his kids, his nieces and his nephews—and he loved to hunt deer.

Entertainment in Delbert's part of the world did not include ballet or opera. A big night out in South Texas would involve high school football (which is more like a religion than entertainment) or two-stepping to the local country music band. While these were popular pastimes for most folks, the one thing that could truly get Delbert fired up was deer hunting. For seven weeks every fall for fifty years or more, Delbert, like thousands of other Texans, pursued his one great passion in life: a shot at a big buck.

Most Texans do not own large tracts of land on which to pursue the wily white-tailed deer. Hunting from public roadways, even in a primitive place like Texas, is against the rules (more about "the rules" later). Instead, a hunter may obtain permission to stalk private land by purchasing a legal instrument that has become a mainstay of South Texas agriculture: a hunting lease. Even if the price of cattle drops below profitability, many ranchers manage to remain solvent, though often at the cost of their sanity, by temporarily selling the hunting rights to their land on a seasonal or yearly basis. The ranchers get additional income and an *interesting* combination of alcohol and high-powered rifles. The hunters get many joyful hours in the freezing rain awaiting their chance at a true trophy buck. The delightful humidity of South Texas winters also provides ample time to compose stories about "the one that got away."

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The fees for this privilege can be as much as several thousand dollars per person for a season, or even for a single day, depending on the ranch. Regardless of the price of the lease, there are seldom any frills included. The type of hunting lease most Texans can afford do not include fancy lodges with hot tubs and mints on the pillows. No, if you want any shelter on your hunting grounds, you either have to build it or haul it in. I have seen a wide variety of architectural interpretations of the legendary “hunting cabin,” ranging from blue-tarp and plywood creations to luxurious motor homes with satellite TV and microwave ovens.

Although the comforts of home may be important to some hunters, to the ever pragmatic Delbert, the location was the key.

A landmark that many folks associate with South Texas is The King Ranch. For many years, it was the largest ranch in the world. It is the home of some famous cattle, pure-blooded horses and perhaps the finest population of white-tailed deer in the Western Hemisphere. While the cattle and horses are raised with careful husbandry, the deer have needed little or no cultivation. They have been well adapted to the brushy, coastal plains of South Texas for thousands of years, and even in the face of competition for grazing land, the deer still flourish.

Over the past hundred and fifty years, The King Ranch has become more than just a large agricultural endeavor. It is an institution. There are generations of people who were born, educated, employed, and buried in what is almost a sovereign state. In 1950s, the only way you could hunt on The King Ranch was to be a governor or somebody equally important. There were no public hunting leases available. In fact, the residents considered outlaw hunters as the thieves that they were and treated them as such. If caught, poachers could expect stiff fines and maybe even a little jail time. Of all the dangerous avocations we Texans enjoy, poaching The King Ranch would be among the most perilous. Like spitting on The Alamo, it is simply not done.

However, Delbert always loved a challenge, and as I mentioned earlier, the concept of rules was often a little fuzzy for him.

In Zapata County, Texas, there was another ranch that *was* available for lease to would-be hunters. This ranch was not ideal in its vegetation, watering holes,

or deer population, but it had one attribute that was of interest to Delbert: It bordered The King Ranch.

Delbert saw this as an opportunity to share in the harvest of the bountiful King Ranch deer. Of course, other hunters had similar thoughts, and the owner of the Zapata ranch explicitly warned them against caving to the temptation of bagging one of Captain King's finest. The landowner informed each hunter to expect to see extra fence riders on The King Ranch side that would point out the presence of the property line to hunters who "may not have seen it."

One chilly fall night, shortly after Delbert had arrived at the Zapata ranch, one of The King Ranch vaqueros "haloed the camp" and rode into the amber circle of campfire light. In broken English, he explained to the hunters that he had seen tracks on his side of the fence made by a man wearing tennis shoes. Since none of the vaqueros or their horses wore tennis shoes, he assumed that somebody may have *mistakenly* crossed the fence. The vaquero casually touched the rifle he carried under the fender of his right stirrup—a clear warning to the hunters. Then, like a wisp of wood smoke, he vanished.

Delbert thoughtfully looked at the soles of his almost new sneakers and decided to spend the rest of the weekend on his side of the fence, but still with the resolve to somehow hunt the mighty King Ranch undetected.

Over the next few days, Delbert devised a plan. Since The King Ranch was a cow outfit, the easiest way to move around on their land would be to turn into a cow...*or leave a track like a cow*. He knew the foreman at the local slaughterhouse and decided to pay him a visit over his lunch hour. Although the foreman had often been approached for dog bones or a deal on a side of beef, nobody had ever asked him for a whole set of bovine feet.

"What the heck do you want feet for?" the foreman asked.

"Oh, just a little science project for my son, little Delbert Jr." Uncle Delbert was nothing if not quick on his feet.

Soon Delbert was at work in his garage. With some effort, he managed to screw, nail, and glue the cow feet to the bottom of some old soccer shoes. Although they were somewhat bulky to get around in at first, they left a track that looked a bunch more like a cow than that of an out-of-work chemist. With

practice, Delbert could walk around in his custom shoes with comfort and a fair degree of stealth.

Armed with an accurate rifle and the cow shoes, Delbert poached the forbidden pastures undetected for almost ten years. He killed many large bucks and was so used to the cow shoes that he doubted he could shoot without them. (He shot one that could have been a record, and I asked him once why he didn't submit it to the Boone and Crockett Club—the “who's who” of trophy hunters—for documentation. He replied, “I couldn't tell 'em it was off the King Ranch! It wouldn't be ethical.”)

Many times Delbert returned to camp carrying a trophy-sized deer, much to the dismay of his less fortunate *compadres*.

“How come you're always so lucky?” they would ask.

“Ain't luck,” Delbert would reply smugly.

Every year, the same group of hunters returned to the Zapata ranch determined to out-hunt Delbert, but they never did.

Finally, figuring that his luck at dodging fence riders was bound to run out sooner or later, my uncle decided to retire a successful, anonymous poacher. After “one last hunt,” that is. (Just “one last” is the fatal flaw in many a tale.)

Leaving camp long before sunrise, Delbert walked along the road that roughly paralleled the fence for about a mile, slipped on the cow shoes, and vanished into the vast, mesquite-thicketed pastures of the legendary King Ranch. He did get a shot at a nice buck later that morning, but his aim was off, the bullet fell harmlessly in the brush, and the deer escaped with a good story to tell his friends about the silly man with a bad aim and feet like a cow. Although he hated to quit, Delbert decided to head back over the fence, hoping that the shot had not attracted the attention of one of the fence riders.

As he carefully rounded a clump of brush, Delbert almost ran under a half-wild mustang and an equally wild vaquero astride him. It's hard to say who was more surprised. There was no escape. With the extra appendages attached to his feet, Delbert knew he couldn't outrun a slow horse, much less the range-bred, cat-like brute that stood on the trail before him.

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The vaquero looked at the character clad in army surplus camo fatigues and flaps-over-the-ears Elmer Fudd cap, carrying a Bowie knife and a sporterized “06” rifle and knew the answer before he asked the question, “*Que paso?*”

As he continued to size up Delbert, his gaze fell upon the bovine-hoof-adorned soccer shoes worn by the now very pale gringo poacher. The vaquero asked to see one of the shoes. Delbert, thinking that the trade might save his life, instantly removed both of the treasured shoes and handed them over.

At this point, Delbert didn’t know what to expect. He knew that some poachers had received harsh treatment from fence riders. He watched as slowly a curious look appeared on the vaquero’s face, as if he had just got the answer to a long-hunted question.

Just about the time Delbert thought he was going to get shot, the vaquero burst out in laughter. Delbert swears to this day that the vaquero’s laughter was so infectious that even his horse slipped a reserved chuckle.

Once he regained his composure, the vaquero explained that the feet on Delbert’s shoes were from a *bull*. The toes of a bull’s foot are blunt and broad. The toes of a *steer* (a young neutered male), however, are pointed and more narrow, similar to those of a *cow*. With both hands the vaquero expressively pointed to the ground and said through his laughter that he’d been looking for ten years for the mysterious bull who occasionally appeared in the cow pasture. He was so tickled with the situation, and apparently impressed by Delbert’s ingenuity, that he let him go with a stern warning not to return. He even let Delbert keep the shoes, saying nobody would believe him, anyway.

Still shaking, Delbert returned to his camp and, later that day, home. He never went back to the Zapata ranch. I suppose his hunting buddies are still wondering why such a successful hunter up and quit. For almost fifty years, Delbert and the vaquero with a sense of humor were the only ones who knew the secret. Now, you do, too.