



WESTON DAVIS

Was Made For Equine Surgery

A second-generation veterinarian, he relishes the challenge of trying to fix horses.

BY ALICE COLLINS

You could be forgiven for thinking that the veterinarian attending your horse has brought a bodyguard along for the ride when Dr. Weston Davis gets out of the car.

He is actually a former club bouncer—having been the beef on the door checking IDs during college at the University of Florida, Gainesville—but Davis is now a sought-after equine surgeon with a string of letters (DVM and DACVS) and accolades to his name, who spends his days operating on multi-million dollar performance animals.

He doesn't adhere to many stereotypes. Davis is big and strapping but soft-spoken, a shy guy who's also self-admittedly a Type-A personality, a veterinarian and an avid hunter and fisher, a self-effacing high-achiever.

After a longer-than-planned day of surgery and treating horses, we meet in an unassuming cafe just off Florida's turnpike. Davis grabs a cup of coffee, cradling it in the setting afternoon sun. He's heading into his fifth year working at Wellington's premier veterinary hospital, Palm Beach Equine Clinic. He got a job there after walking in unannounced and asking if they'd consider him should a position become available.

"We need you now," came the response, and there was a scramble for him to start right away.

The busy season in Wellington begins in November and sees Davis working "basically seven days a week" through the end of March as billions of dollars of horse flesh take up residence at the Winter Equestrian Festival, just a stone's throw from the clinic.

His days normally start around 6 a.m. with an hour in the gym, lifting weights or swimming.

"It's one of the only things that keeps me sane," says the 36-year-old Florida native. "I get balled-up if I can't do it."

Like a horse that can't abide stall rest, Davis chafed after surgery to treat a carpal tunnel-like condition in his right elbow last year. It was a scary episode as, in the run-up to diagnosis, he struggled to straighten his fingers enough to get them inside his surgical gloves and had disruption in the sensation in his fingers.

"I begged the doctor to do it under local anesthetic, but he said, 'No way,' so I had to have a general," said Davis. "I was still back out treating horses the next day and even managed to shock myself on an electric fence that day."

He was initially critical of the scar left by the surgeon. "My arm was all swollen, and I didn't think he'd done a great job, but when the swelling went down, he'd actually been pretty neat," Davis admits.

Between injuries acquired on the job and in his leisure activities, Davis is no stranger to working through pain. There was the botched "depart" from a horse after a few beers while steer wrestling, which resulted in a kick to the face from the steer as he crash-landed. That landed him in the hospital with a fracture and a metal plate inserted below his left eye.

His father, John Davis, shares another story of injury.

"He was in North Carolina I believe, and we had planned a ski vacation between Christmas and New Year," recalls John. "We were going to go on the trip on Friday afternoon, and

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—DR. WESTON DAVIS

Weston was all done with his regular surgeries. But there was another surgery at a private facility that he was interested in. They didn't have quite such good equipment, but he wanted to learn about the surgery. So he goes over there, and as he's putting the horse down to do the surgery, it fell on his leg and cracked his ankle. He still did the surgery. For the whole week Weston didn't get to ski.

"That sums up a lot about Weston; he goes above and beyond," continues John. "He's never one to miss out on what he can learn and be better at."

Weston says the injuries are part and parcel of being a veterinarian, and he admits to getting kicked about once a year. "I'm mostly just grateful that horses cooperate most days," he says. "I like to think I'm reading the horses well, but they're such powerful animals, and these things happen."

Learning Early

Weston grew up in Fort Myers, Florida, and his family has raised cattle in Clewiston, Florida, for as far back as he can remember. A second-generation veterinarian, some of Weston's earliest memories are of helping John spay cats and dogs. Many kids would be grossed out by incisions and blood, but little Weston was fascinated. That progressed to assisting with cow surgeries, and things snowballed from there.

"When he was a little guy, Weston and his brother Brandon—who is now a pilot for JetBlue—both wanted to be vets," says John. "They both took a liking to the horses and did a lot of team roping. They were always wanting to do more than they could, and their mother and me would have to be protective of them and stop them getting hurt. As it went along, Weston became more and more interested in taking care of animals."

Weston doesn't do much riding these days, but when he does, he's helping his family with the cattle.

"He was always making straight As and was very motivated with the studying and learning," says John. "And he's ideally suited to work with big animals; it's physically strenuous and mentally demanding, and orthopedics are even tougher."

"I wasn't really made for small animals," concurs Weston. "I wanted to do big ones. But you have to learn everything before you can specialize. At school I always wanted to do more, and with surgery you get to truly fix a lot of things, and that's a really good feeling."

▶ HORSE CARE

While he's performed all kinds of surgeries, his favorites are laparoscopy and arthroscopy. "They're minimally invasive, and the horse can be back to work in two weeks," he explains.

Lacking In Leisure

When not wearing surgical scrubs, Weston stays busy renovating houses in South Florida. He now owns a quadraplex near Wellington in Lake Worth, living in one of the apartments with his long-term girlfriend Susanna Hearn, who is a physical therapist, and their three dogs. They also own a house, which they rent out for the winter season.

An enthusiastic sportsman, he says he loves anything outside. "The fishing and proximity to deep blue water and the Bahamas is a really exciting part of the geography for me here," says Weston. "I don't have much time to get out there most of the year, but we made a great family trip this summer, and I'm hoping to continue the tradition."

In 2016 he also found time to start a business, Stall Destinations, which is basically an Airbnb for horses. The

service links owners of paddocks, stalls and barns with people needing housing for their horse from one night to an entire winter in Wellington.

"I started renting out the apartment building in Lake Worth through Airbnb, and I really loved the concept and the people that came through," he says. "Then I was lying in bed one day, and I thought, 'This is something I need to do.' I'd been using Airbnb myself for quite some time, and I realized this would make a whole load of sense for horse people. They need this service."

The service is supposed to benefit all sorts of equestrians—Arizona cowboys who need an RV hookup and three stalls for an evening on their way to a rodeo, a trail riding couple looking for a facility where they can camp for a week near a national park, a horse show person planning to stay near WEF for a month, or a dressage enthusiast looking for board for her horse near home.

Like the human version of Airbnb, the site thrives on reviews to give clients in-depth information and real-life experiences on which to base their choices.

▶ A Case He'll Never Forget

Ask Weston Davis, DVM, DACVS, to pick his most memorable case, and he'll admit that it's hard to choose just one. But there is a bizarre accident that's near the top of the list.

"I was fresh out of residency, and it was a particularly bad head trauma in a very sweet mare," he says. "While at pasture, she had a high speed injury with a telephone guide wire that caused a huge laceration with numerous facial bone fractures. Her eye was ruptured, and the optic nerve was damaged. She had basically tried to shear off the right side of her face, centering at the eye.

"We stabilized her and did a really nice protocol of sedation and local blocks, so she wouldn't feel a thing for a standing surgical repair," he continues. "Although we couldn't save the eye, we debrided and cleaned her damaged and contaminated tissues, repaired all of her facial fractures, placed a drain in her sinus, and left an antibiotic impregnated orbital prosthesis to improve the cosmetic outcome. Just a couple hours after she arrived at the hospital, she went back to her stall and ate dinner like nothing happened."

The Palm Beach Equine Clinic posted photos of the case on social media, and there was a bit of an uproar because it was truly that gruesome. The mare looked like someone had taken a meat cleaver to the middle of her head before the surgery.

"I remember comments about how the mare should have been put down," says Davis. "I found that odd because while it was a bad accident, ultimately I know that mare didn't want to give up over it, and it ended up being just a little hiccup for her with good pain management and quick surgical intervention. She went home from the hospital just a couple days later, and that sweet mare never looked back—no pun intended!"



This mare came into the Palm Beach Equine Clinic with a horrific injury—she'd almost cut her face in half after running into a telephone guide wire. Dr. Weston Davis was able to save her life with surgery, and after four weeks, she was completely healed. PHOTO COURTESY OF THE PALM BEACH EQUINE CLINIC



Stall Destinations also chooses an equine non-profit organization each month and donates \$100 and 10 percent of the proceeds to them.

Though still in its infancy, there are more than 150 listings from Maine to California, with everything in between, in Stall Destinations' network. Weston and Hearn—who has been an instrumental part of the budding enterprise—hope to keep expanding.

"I really want to see Stall Destinations fly; that's in the five-year plan," Weston says.

I ask what else is in the five-year plan.

"I see all my friends with kids on Facebook, and it makes me realize I've been putting off some of the family stuff; I've sacrificed some of that for the professional stuff," he says.

It's Worth It

The day we meet, his first task was a minor surgery on a horse with retained testicles. Then the team headed to a local barn for a pre-purchase exam on a jumper, with the usual add-ons when the client asked if Weston could just glance at a couple other horses—one a mild lameness case and another with summer sores, which are common in South Florida. At another farm he performed a stem cell injection on a meniscal repair. Then an emergency was called in for a sick foal with an infected growth plate.

The pace of his veterinary work initially took a toll on his health, as he had little time to eat well, but he slimmed down from 230 pounds to 210, thanks to "the best life hack"—getting nutritionally balanced meals sent straight to the clinic. It stops him grabbing junk food for lunch on days when time is tight, which is pretty much all of them.

When Weston first started at Palm Beach Equine, it was hard not to be intimidated by the value of the horses he was treating.

"Saving a life is one of the most rewarding things you can imagine," says Dr. Weston Davis (left, shown with Dr. Michael Myhre). "That is what makes all of the sacrifice and long hours worthwhile." LINDSAY

BROCK/JUMP MEDIA PHOTO

"In my first year, I thought a lot about how some of these horses exceed the insurance liability, so if something were to happen ..." he trails off. "But then I changed gear, and now a little girl crying over her pony almost means more than the \$2 million race horse. It's not the value behind the horse. That doesn't really matter; I got used to that. It's all about doing the absolute best for each individual horse."

Of course there are always operations that don't go to plan. He looks wistfully into the distance as he mentally catalogues some of the bad ones and shakes his head.

"You get a lot of thank-you cards—and that's great—but the bad ones stick with you the most," he says. "They haunt you and stay in the back of your mind."

"But that's medicine," he adds. "You always want to do your absolute best. Being a Type-A person and wanting to excel, you're always critical and wondering if whether you'd done something different would have equaled a better outcome."

Weston also enjoys helping horses by educating veterinary students.

"I'd like the chance to be able to do more teaching. And more surgery," he adds with a grin. "Always more surgery. That's what drives my motor. Saving a life is one of the most rewarding things you can imagine. That is what makes all of the sacrifice and long hours worthwhile."

"And teaching's always been a big goal," he adds. "Excellent case outcomes are wonderful, but the only thing that rivals that feeling is seeing the young ones come up and be proficient and happy." ●