



CATHY SUMMERS

FROM PASSION TO SERVICE

Farmington Hunt President Reynolds Cowles, DVM, to lead the American Association of Equine Practitioners (AAEP). **BY MARTHA DRUM**

Foxhunters and the AAEP

Dr. Cowles is not the first foxhunter to lead the prestigious American Association of Equine Practitioners. Dr. Marvin Beeman, Master and huntsman for the Arapahoe Hunt in Colorado, was a board member and president of the organization in 1975.

Dr. Beeman also gave the keynote speech at the organization's 60th annual convention, held in Salt Lake City in 2014. He is also a past president of MFHA (2008-2011).

DR. COWLES GREW UP in a farming and sporting family where service and initiative were the example. In 1918, his grandfather started the first foxhound field trials in North Carolina. His father raised purebred Jersey cattle, bred jacks on Army remount mares to produce quality mules (innovating artificial insemination in the 1930s), and his mother was the county tax supervisor. Surrounded by working horses, he became an instant Thoroughbred fan watching the 1956 Kentucky Derby on television. He speaks strongly about that influence on his future career: "It starts with a passion for the horse," he says with animation, "regardless of the ability or kind of horse, it drives us, that passion."

As Dr. Cowles began his career with horses, he benefited from mentors such as Dr. Joe O'Day, Dr. Dan Flynn, Felix Neusch, Danny Van Clief. He

underscores that they shepherded his development and also inspired him to give back. With their guidance, Dr. Cowles gained experience in all areas of the Thoroughbred industry and in the polo, foxhunting, and jump racing communities. He ultimately landed near Charlottesville, practicing at Georgetown Veterinary Hospital before establishing Blue Ridge Equine Clinic in 1978.

Throughout his professional progress, Dr. Cowles maintained a sense of gratitude and obligation to contribute. His service began on veterinary and racing committees in Virginia, then gradually expanded to leadership in national organizations. "The AAEP has been so good to me. It's been so good at supporting its members through advocacy and education. It's fun to give back. It's an honor," he explains.

While inspired by passion for the horse, Dr. Cowles' successful stewardship results from his pragmatic eye for sound business. Across the groups he's led, from a hunt club with fewer than 200 members, to the AAEP, with nearly 9,300, he insists the challenges are the same. "You've got to have organizational management, goal setting, and communication — just like you'd need in any business, church, or civic organization. There have to be systems in place to channel ideas and ensure you get results."

Asked about specific challenges facing hunt clubs, Dr. Cowles identifies a changing membership: "This sport was once fueled, in many places, by just a few wealthy families and landowners, and it is a very traditional sport. But we need to be adaptable to changes in

society. We have to observe and adapt, to diversify the sources of income, to reach out to a wider community for support." To meet these and other desired outcomes, strategic planning is critical. Hunt clubs must articulate goals, brainstorm and then refine steps to achieve them, and maintain a schedule for completion. The plan needs to be reviewed and reevaluated regularly.

Dr. Cowles recommends officers and Masters identify needs, then form committees and empower them to act — acknowledging this can be difficult to do. He underscores that accomplishments are ultimately the result of team efforts, and emphasizes that leaders need to be proactive to recruit others. "You have to ask," he explains. "You have to go and get the talent that is available in your group." At Farmington, this process helped get the kennels, stable, and clubhouse property placed in conservation easement last year, which provides financial benefit to the club through Virginia's tax credit resale program.

Having transitioned out of ownership of Blue Ridge Equine Clinic's successful ambulatory and inpatient practice, Dr. Cowles remains busy on staff treating patients. Asked how he spends time when he's not around horses, Dr. Cowles gives a quick reply: "Playing with my bird dogs or fly rods in Montana. Or bush hogging!"

Martha Drum is the social media editor for *Covertsides*. She gives lessons camps at her Easy Keeper Farm in Va. A former Associate Master of Norfolk Hunt, she now rides with Farmington and Keswick Hunts.