

So shall you reap

Seattle Slew's donation to wobbler research in 1977 saves his life 23 years later

by Denise Steffanus

ON JULY 19, 1975, a plain, brown Bold Reasoning colt eyed the crowd from the sale ring at Fasig-Tipton Co.'s Newtown Paddocks in Kentucky. Unremarkable when compared to flashy yearlings that strutted into the ring, he turned few heads.

Among the buyers seated in the audience were Washington natives Karen and Mickey Taylor. The Taylors were curious to see what hard-boots thought of this colt. In spite of the horse's rejection from Keeneland's July selected yearling sale, the Taylors thought he had pizzazz. Their adviser, Florida veterinarian Jim Hill, insisted the colt would make a runner and urged them on.

The Taylors had set a budget of \$15,000 for hip number 128, and Mickey Taylor plunged into the bidding, but he pulled out when it reached his limit. As the bidding lumbered upward, Karen Taylor and the colt found themselves staring into each other's eyes, and there was a flicker of instant recognition, as if both were seeing the same vision of the future.

Karen Taylor elbowed her husband. "Bid," she told him. He looked sideways at her for a moment and then back at the colt in the ring. Again,

she elbowed him and urged, "Bid."

Mickey Taylor nodded to the auctioneer as he droned, "Seventeen-five? Do I have seventeen-five?" After a moment of breathtaking silence, the hammer fell at \$17,500, and the Taylors signed the ticket for the ride of their lives—through the Triple Crown aboard the colt they named Seattle Slew.

His career was magical, both on the racetrack and at stud. He earned four Eclipse Awards, including Horse of the Year in 1977, when he became the first horse ever to win the Triple Crown without a defeat on his record. He then became one of the world's leading sires and an important sire of sires.

Right up to his death on May 7, the magical threads of his life entwined everyone he touched. One of those threads extended back to the Taylors' native Washington state and to his Triple Crown season. Without that thread, Slew's life very well may have ended two years earlier.

Taylors' lucky Penney

The Taylors' extraordinary luck with horses began in 1973 when they met Washington veterinarian Bob Penney. Penney found them their first Thoroughbred, a gelding named Triangular, who won his first start for the Taylors on December 31, 1973. Penney later introduced the Taylors to Hill. With Hill's wife, Sally, as the fourth partner, they formed Tayhill Stable, in whose name Seattle Slew raced.

While the eyes of the world were focused on the 1977 Triple Crown winner, Washingtonians felt a special



Tony Leonard photo

SYMPTOMS REVEALED

In January 2000, Seattle Slew's longtime groom, Tom Wade, led the stallion out of his stall for his regular morning gallop but sensed the 26-year-old Triple Crown winner did not seem quite right. Seattle Slew later was diagnosed as having wobbler disease.

connection to the champion. Although Seattle Slew was a Kentucky-bred, Mickey Taylor was a fourth-generation logger, and he and his flight attendant wife lived in White Swan. So, by proxy, Slew became Washington's favorite son. And Penney thought it was time Washingtonians saw him in the flesh.

if we could stop at Longacres on our way back to New York. Bob wanted us to parade him there," Mickey Taylor recalled. "I told Bob it was fine with us."

Back at Longacres, Penney convinced the Seattle-area track's owner, Morris Alhadeff, that Slew's visit would be the biggest draw in the

Taylor insists that it was Slew's gift to the schools and that she and her husband do not deserve credit for the good deed.

July 8 and 9, 1977, were the dates set for Slew to make two appearances, billed as Golden Gallops, past the grandstands at Longacres.

Ken Alhadeff, who was 28 years old when his father brought Slew to Longacres, still replays that first Golden Gallop in his mind.

"So, all he's going to do here is take a light gallop around the racetrack and be applauded," Ken Alhadeff said. "He starts galloping, and goes down the backstretch, and then he starts heading toward home and the people start screaming. And Slew thinks he's racing. Slew pins his ears back and goes into a dead run with a 145-pound rider on his back. They brought him into the winner's circle, and he's sweating and his nostrils are swelling and he thought he just won another race."

Lost somewhere behind those screaming fans was a young equine surgeon, Barrie Grant, from Washington State University's School of Veterinary Medicine. He stood on tiptoes as he extended his camera high in the air at arms length, hoping to snap a fleeting shot of the Triple Crown winner's encore appearance.

One of the Washington programs that benefited from Slew's appearance that day was Grant's research into wobbler disease, a neurological condition caused by impingement of the spinal cord in the horse's neck by malformed or degenerated vertebrae.

He and orthopedic surgeon George Bagby, M.D., had been collaborating to adapt a human technique called the Cloward procedure to help wobblers. The procedure employed a dowel-shaped bone graft pounded into a hole drilled into the vertebrae to stabilize the cervical spine and relieve pressure on the spinal cord.

They had performed their first procedure in February 1977 and, although the procedure worked, the horse succumbed to pneumonia four days later. But their second attempt, performed the day Slew won the Kentucky Derby (G1), was an overwhelming success.

Washington veterinarian Bob Penney arranged for Seattle Slew's appearance fee—\$100,000—to be split between the University of Washington and Washington State University. Each school received \$50,000. But Karen Taylor insists that it was Slew's gift to the schools and that she and her husband do not deserve credit for the good deed.

Seattle Slew was at Hollywood Park for the Swaps Stakes (G1), which would be his last race of the year. Penney traveled down from Washington to visit his old friends, the Taylors, and pitched his idea.

"When we went to Los Angeles, Bob [Penney] approached me to see

track's history. The deal was sealed, but with one stipulation.

"Bob arranged for the money for our appearance fee—\$100,000—to be split between the University of Washington and Washington State University. They each got \$50,000," Mickey Taylor explained. But Karen

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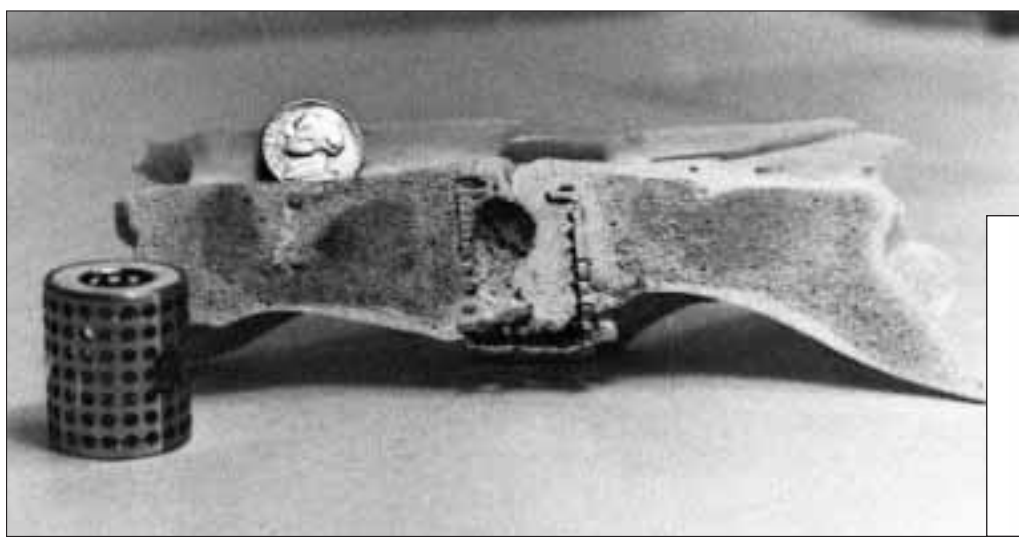
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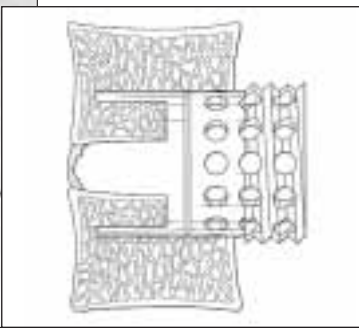
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Dawn Roberts, Oct. 1999

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MAKING A BASKET

To stabilize a horse's cervical spine and relieve pressure on the spinal cord caused by wobbler disease, a Bagby basket, left, is pounded into a hole drilled into the horse's vertebrae. Seattle Slew underwent surgery to insert a Bagby basket in April 2000 and again in March 2002



Courtesy of Barrie Grant, D.V.M.

VET SPOTLIGHT from page 45

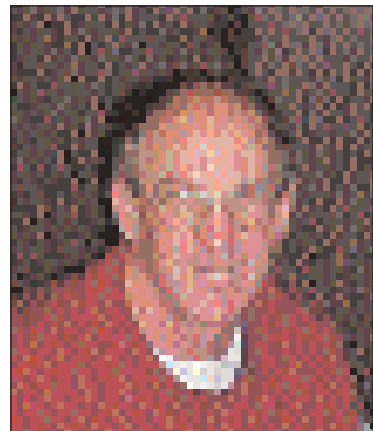
The school's windfall generated by Seattle Slew's visit enabled Grant and Bagby to advance their research. They eventually developed a stainless-steel, threaded dowel called the Bagby basket to replace the use of a bone graft. Holes in the uniquely crafted basket allowed new bone to grow through and around the implant, virtually incorporating it into the vertebrae.

Curious twist of fate

Call it karma or reaping what you sow, Slew's contribution to wobbler research, which seemed inconsequential in 1977, was the seed that grew into the tree of life for the stallion 23 years later.

In the autumn of his long and successful career at stud, the Racing Hall of Fame member began to develop subtle neurological problems early in 2000. On January 13, Slew's longtime groom, Tom Wade, took the stallion out of his stall for his regular morning gallop at Three Chimneys Farm near Midway. When he tossed the rider up, Wade cautioned him that Slew did not seem quite right. Almost immediately after setting out, the rider brought Slew back and told Wade he had a problem.

"Tom called us and said, 'Get to Kentucky ASAP,'" Karen Taylor recalled. At the same time, James Morehead, D.V.M., Three Chimneys's resident veterinarian, put in an emergency call to William Bernard, D.V.M., of Rood and Riddle Equine Hospital near Lexington.



Courtesy of Barrie Grant, D.V.M.

DR. BARRIE GRANT

He and orthopedic surgeon George Bagby achieve first success with their procedure on the day Seattle Slew wins the 1977 Kentucky Derby

At first, Slew's symptoms seemed to indicate that he had contracted equine protozoal encephalomyelitis (EPM), a neurological disease that damages the spinal cord. A diagnostic spinal tap was inconclusive but, as a precaution, Slew was placed on EPM medication. A later nuclear scintigraphy scan revealed two hot spots in the vertebrae of Slew's cervical spine. The 26-year-old stallion was suffering from wobbler disease.

Fortunately, Slew had an old friend on the West Coast who knew exactly what to do to help him. It was Grant's turn to repay the good deed.

Now a world-renowned equine surgeon at San Luis Rey Equine Hospital in Bonsall, California, Grant had continued his work with wobblers. He and a team from his Bonsall clinic flew to Kentucky, including Norman Rantanen, D.V.M., whom Grant regards as the best equine radiologist in the world.

Rantanen injected cortisone into Slew's vertebrae at cervical levels 5-6 and 6-7, and within two days the stallion's clinical signs disappeared. Unfortunately, on February 2, 2000, Wade found Slew crashing around



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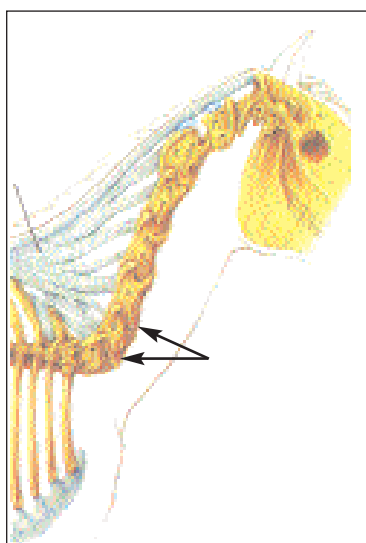
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POINT OF PROBLEM
Arrows indicate areas of spinal cord compression discovered in Seattle Slew in 2000 due to arthritic changes in his vertebrae

spine at level 5-6, but neither Rantanen nor Grant was convinced it required surgical correction. Also, at Slew's age, it would be dangerous to extend the time he would be under general anesthesia to implant a second Bagby basket. Prudence dictated that they wait until and if the condition of level 5-6 deteriorated.

Nearly two years after the first surgery, Slew developed neurological symptoms stemming from compression of the level 5-6 vertebrae, and Grant and his team returned to Kentucky to perform a second surgery on March 2, 2002, to implant another Bagby basket.

In the weeks following Slew's second surgery, the Taylors sent Grant videotapes of Slew's progress every Friday. But even though it appeared their roles were reversed—with Slew on the receiving end—Grant maintained that the champion was still giving of himself by providing education for veterinarians and hope for horses with wobblers disease.

"It was very gratifying and educational for me to be able to see how

horses slowly progress and improve in clinical signs," Grant said. "More than anything, Slew has championed this disease and has made it okay to talk about horses having spinal problems and to convince people it is okay to do surgery."

At age 28, Slew lost his battle with wobblers disease, but his fight benefited other horses suffering from the disease.

Karen Taylor believes Slew's destiny has been to fulfill a higher purpose, and that he has done it with the same bravado and class that were the hallmarks of his life.

"Each of us is born with a destiny, and I think that you try to do good things in life and you don't expect anything in return," Taylor said. "But this

is one time when a good deed was done, and it was rewarded in one's lifetime. This was Slew's good deed, not ours. He was given to us as a gift, and we are the stewards of that gift.

"Slew has always tried to better the world," she continued. "It wasn't just the Triple Crown that made him great or even what he has given to the Thoroughbred industry. What he has overcome has been remarkable for veterinary science." ❧



Denise Steffanus is a contributing editor of THOROUGHBRED TIMES who writes frequently on veterinary and farm management topics.

his stall and trembling as he leaned against a wall to keep from falling down. "That's the day we almost lost him," said Karen Taylor.

This time, Rantanen was unavailable, being on a lecture tour in Italy, and the only other person familiar with using radiography to guide a spinal injection was Steve Reed, D.V.M., of Ohio State University, but he was laid up with a broken leg. The Taylors turned to Grant, who was attending an equine practitioners' convention in Puerto Villarta.

"I can't even play Pac Man," Grant joked. "So I asked them to give me a few minutes and I called my partner, Joe Cannon. I said to him, 'Joe, it's the bottom of the ninth, there's two outs, and the Dodgers are down one run.'

"We're both Dodger fans and Joe has crippled knees, so he knew what I meant," Grant said, referring to the 1988 Dodgers versus Oakland A's World Series game in which Kirk Gibson, hobbled by a knee injury, hit a game-winning home run with two out in the ninth inning. (The Dodgers upset the powerhouse A's in five games.)

"Joe said, 'Yeah, I know ... send in the cripple.'"

Cannon told Grant he would do it as long as there was not a crowd. When he arrived at Rood and Riddle, 20 people had come to watch. Despite the audience, Cannon injected Slew's spine and again the stallion's symptoms subsided, only to return 17 days later.

The Taylors discussed the possibility of neck surgery for Slew with Three Chimneys owner Robert Clay, farm manager Dan Rosenberg, and a handful of veterinary experts. They decided it was the best course to restore the stallion's quality of life. Surgery was scheduled for April 2.

"I was the lead surgeon, so I made the incision," Grant said. "I had Dr. Rich Pankowski, our associate at the time who had helped me with a lot of the procedures; Jan Sargent-Beach was our tech. Norm Rantanen was the radiologist. We wanted to make believe it was like Bonsall, so we brought everybody back with us who was involved with the surgery there."

In addition to the Bonsall team, John Hubbell, D.V.M., of OSU handled the anesthesia, a risky procedure for the 26-year-old stallion.

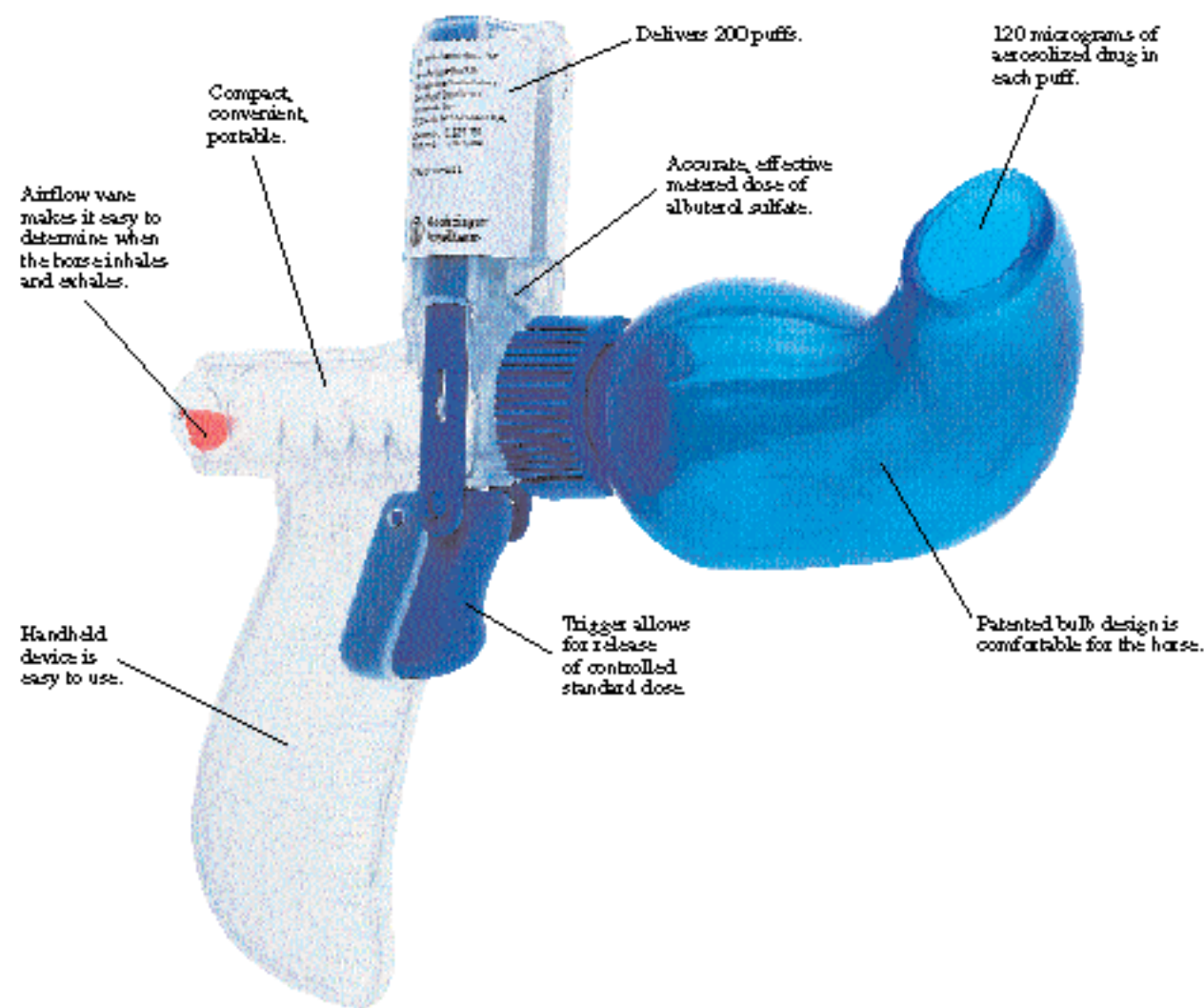
Grant inserted the Bagby basket into a hole drilled into Slew's vertebrae at cervical level 6-7. The surgery was an overwhelming success and, after rolling up onto his chest about 75 minutes later, the champion sprang to his feet. Ten months later, he was ready to begin the 2001 breeding season.

Second surgery

At the time of the first surgery to fuse cervical level 6-7, a question remained about the condition of Slew's



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