



Equine Medical Research Gets Funds From USEA

Event riders have added \$1 to their starter fees to support equine research. And they've challenged others to do the same.

Late one evening at the U.S. Eventing Association's annual meeting in December 2010, Mike Van Noy, DVM, approached his friend Kevin Baumgardner, who was on the last day of his job as the USEA's president, with a grand idea. Van Noy wanted to raise the starter fee—the fee paid by every rider to start a horse in every competition—by \$1, in order to raise funds desperately needed for equine research.

“We should be the ones who are funding equine medical research—it's our own horses who benefit,” Van Noy told Baumgardner.

Baumgardner thought Van Noy had a great idea, but he wasn't willing to impose a new plan upon the new president. But Van Noy, the founder of Auburn Labs (the maker of APF), wouldn't let his plan die, and he kept pestering Baumgardner, until he and others agreed to develop the idea into a plan and to present it to the USEA Board of Directors. That group approved the starter fee increase just last December, and funds are already rolling in as the 2014 season hits full steam.

“I really think it's potentially a game changer, something that down the road all the disciplines could be doing, and something we could point to with a lot of pride in the future,” said Baumgardner.

Four research projects have already been selected for funding this year (see sidebar), using \$21,000 in seed money, including more than



By adding \$1 to every starter fee, event riders are now making a significant contribution to equine veterinary research.

\$7,000 from the American Horse Trials Foundation account of Olympic event rider Amy Tryon, who died in 2012.

In 2014, the USEA starter fees will net almost double that total—about \$40,000—from more than 42,000 starters.

“There is a shocking gap in basic equine medical research, and this would not only be a great way to help close it, but it would also be a way to further inoculate our sport against attack from well-meaning but uninformed people and organizations who do not understand our deep concern for our horses' welfare, particularly at times when accidents happen and we get bad press,” said Baumgardner. “And if we challenged all the other disciplines to do the same thing, we could potentially raise hundreds of thousands a year, for the benefit of our horses.”

A Pittance Compared to Dogs. The United States is home to roughly 50 million dogs and 65 million cats, compared to 9 million horses, owned by about 1.5 million people. When many of those millions of dogs and cats die each year, thousands of bereaved owners donate money to groups like the Morris Animal Foundation in their memory, especially if they've died of cancer. It's so much money that, according to Van Noy, the Morris Animal Foundation can't use it all for medical research on dogs and cats, and so these memorial contributions have been the primary source of their funding for equine medical research.

Scott Koskoski, the director of major gifts and planned giving at MAF, said that the MAF commits to a minimum of \$1 million per year for equine research. He said that the funding for canine medical research consistently averages \$30 million per year from a variety of sources, while equine medical researchers

are vying for a maximum of about \$2 million per year. In addition to the MAF, The Grayson Jockey Club Foundation usually funds \$500,000 to \$1 million (mostly focused on Thoroughbred racing), and the American Association of Equine Practitioners adds about \$100,000.

These three organizations are the primary funding sources of equine medical research, aside from the fund-raising and research done by the major equine veterinary schools, especially Penn, Cornell, UC Davis and Colorado State University. Their research can amount to several millions of dollars a year, but that money comes from carefully targeted fund-raising programs and is often the result of the researcher's or surgeon's relationship with a wealthy individual or corporation.

Plus, the American Quarter Horse Association has its own medical-

research foundation, which provides funds worth several hundred thousand to equine medical research each year.

The U.S. government sometimes kicks in funding too, but, says Koskoski, it's minimal "unless horses are used as vectors for human disease (like West Nile virus) or as a model for human disease (usually inflammation)." Even then, he estimates the federal funding won't exceed \$3 million in a year.

While many companies that make drugs and medications for companion animals provide millions each year to their research, they spend next to nothing on equine research. Why? The market isn't big enough, in comparison to companion animals or food animals, to make it financially viable.

"Given that Morris Animal Foundation commits to a minimum funding floor of \$1 million for equine research annually, the USEA program has spoken for nearly 5 percent of that funding, which is quite significant. What's more, thanks to this partnership, the Foundation can potentially say yes to one more study proposal that might have been scientifically meritorious but is without available funds," said Koskoski.

"Even more important is the message that the USEA sends by this partnership. The message is that veterinary medical research for the horse truly matters, and that horses aren't just seen as disposable pieces of a portfolio. For eventing, and the sport-horse community, to collectively make this statement about the health of the horse is truly powerful."

They've Climbed The Summit.

Van Noy believes that "the neat thing is that now that the USEA has done this, the people at other organizations can say, 'OK someone has already done this. We can too.' It's like we've already gone to the summit of Mt. Everest or run a four-minute mile, so the others think, 'Let's do that too.' It becomes believable and do-able to them. I'm very proud of the eventers for being the lead dog."

He added, "The concept is that this becomes a perpetual-motion

machine, with all of us contributing, automatically."

So how much more could starter fees raise for equine medical research if other disciplines under the U.S. Equestrian Federation umbrella followed the USEA's lead? Well, the U.S. Hunter Jumper Association—the largest English-riding

organization—has 44,000 members. If they each compete in an average of 10 shows per year, and they pay \$1 for each show, that's \$440,000 per year added to the equine-research coffers.

Bill Moroney, the USHJA president, said that he had not previously heard about the USEA's starter-

Four Reasons For Organizations To Accept The USEA's Challenge

Mike Van Noy, Kevin Baumgardner and Katherine Cooper knew that they would need to make a strong case to convince the U.S. Eventing Association's Board of Governors to add \$1 to the starter fee for every horse at every event, so they crafted a list of reasons to quiet the skeptics. Those same reasons form their argument for why the leaders of other equine-sports organizations should meet their friendly challenge to fund equine medical research.

First, says Baumgardner, the amount you pay depends entirely on how much you play. If you're a low-level competitor who competes just three or five times a year, can you really complain about paying \$3 or \$5, the same as you'd pay for one cup of coffee at Starbucks? And, if you're an international competitor who competes 200 times a year, that \$200 is just a tiny fraction of your competition and horse-care budget.

"That's the beauty of \$1—it's really painless. It doesn't gore anyone's ox, and it could make a real difference, a difference that will benefit our horses, the horses we compete," said Baumgardner.

Second, Cooper believes that people who compete their horses need to take more responsibility for funding the scientific work that will improve their horses' welfare.

"I think most people think what I used to —that the drug companies put money into horses and there is a lot being done. That is, sadly, not the case," said Cooper. "I've faced a lot of medical issues with my own horses, and I've been repeatedly frustrated by the lack of answers that I can find, because the data and research is just not out there."

Third, Van Noy anticipates that funding equine medical research has a public-relations aspect that could be useful.

"You've always got the PETA people and the HSUS people, who all believe that we shouldn't ride horses, that horses should be set out in the pasture someplace and admired," he said. "So if the various competitive disciplines can get behind this, it gives us some really important ammunition when they come after us. We can say, 'Yes, we ride horses, but we're doing this very important effort to provide for their medical needs.'"

Fourth, the USEA's leaders (as well as other groups' leaders) will decide where their money goes, after receiving the recommendations from the Morris Animal Foundation's team of evaluators. "We will make sure our funds go to areas that will impact event horses—a pretty broad span of potential topics given the number of breeds, ages and types our sport draws in. But we will not be funding, for example, studies researching problems that are specific to miniature horses," said Cooper.

Four Studies Earn Funding For 2014

The Morris Animal Foundation submitted a list of 10 research projects for the U.S. Eventing Association to consider funding for 2014, using the \$21,000 they raised to kick off the program. On Feb. 18 the Executive Committee approved the following four projects:

- **To receive \$7,000:** "Understanding Two Common Causes of Tying-Up in Horses," by Dr. Charlotte J. Maile, Royal Veterinary College. Total Study Cost: \$106,677.
- **To receive \$7,000:** "Evaluating Potential Cell-Based Therapy for Articular Cartilage Defects in Horses," by Dr. Emma N. Adam, University of Kentucky. Total Study Cost: \$110,000.
- **To receive \$3,500:** "Evaluating a Test for Assessing Insulin Response and Sensitivity in Horses," by Dr. Jill McCutcheon, Michigan State University. Total Study Cost: \$11,880.
- **To receive \$3,500:** "Improving Immunotherapy for Allergy Treatment in Horses," by Dr. Eliane Marti, University of Berne. Total Study Cost: \$11,880.



USEA President Diane Pitts, right, presents the first medical research check to the Morris Animal Foundation staff members Scott Koskowski, left, and Winona Burgess DVM.

fee plan. "I believe in equine research and that we need more of it," said Moroney, who put the program in front of the USHJA Executive Committee at their February meeting. Moroney said that the committee members decided, "since we are beginning our next strategic planning initiative, we are not ready to consider a program commitment of this type at this time."

Van Noy is currently lobbying the U.S. Dressage Federation and the American Endurance Ride Conference to follow the USEA's lead. He's already convinced two influential endurance riders—former World Champions Becky Hart and Valerie Kanavy—to support the program, and he'll be at the AERC convention this month to seek the organization's approval.

"We want to issue a friendly challenge to every equine organization, and it seems like the endurance folks are going to likely be the first

to follow our lead," he said.

If the USDF's 30,000 members joined in, and they compete 10 times a year, there's another \$300,000. If the AERC and other smaller discipline and breed associations joined in, you could estimate roughly \$100,000 in annual funds. That's a total of nearly \$800,000 annually, a nearly 50-percent increase from the current level.

"We hope that it's a challenge that will be taken up by the entire sport-horse industry," said Baumgardner.

Working With The Morris Animal Foundation. Van Noy, Baumgardner and their fellow committee member Katherine Cooper didn't want to create a new layer of bureaucracy to administer this program. They reasoned that they couldn't possibly choose grant recipients better than the Morris Animal Foundation, which has a team of veterinarians who spend hundreds of thousands

of man-hours each year analyzing dozens of grant applications. So they eagerly teamed up with the MAF, which sends to the USEA 10 to 12 proposals they've selected as worthy. The six members of the USEA committee then choose which projects to fund. (See the sidebar for the four research projects they've chosen for 2014.)

Collecting the funds is simple too. Event organizers were already collecting \$20 in USEA starter fees, which they forward to the USEA office after their events. They'll do the same with the \$1 research fee, and the USEA will hold the money in its endowment fund until it's sent to the MAF for distribution, minus an 8-percent administration fee. Baumgardner said he would expect other organizations to use a similar model.

Baumgardner and Van Noy give Cooper the credit for convincing the USEA Board of Governors to endorse the \$1 fee, because she's the only one of them who's a current board member. She sees it as a matter of her fellow eventers supporting their horses' welfare needs.

"The basic issue is this: Our horses are being short-changed in the medical research world, and we need to do something about it," she said. "Eventers as a group are completely and totally dedicated to the health and welfare of these athletes who do so much for us. We owe it to them to have the best care they can get, and we need to spend some money to keep their health care improving. To me, spending \$1 per entry is the very least I can do to help my horse stay healthy."

Said Koskoski of the MAF, "We're excited for this partnership to succeed, and we hope it will inspire the USEA's adjacent organizations to begin similar relationships with Morris Animal Foundation. Together, we can truly move the needle for, and change the face of, equine medical research."

Article by Horse Journal Performance Editor John Strassburger.

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