

Photo by Leslie Guttman

The Race is On

Lexington writer Leslie Guttman's first book is a year in an Equine E.T.

By Kim Thomas

Rood & Riddle field vet Dr. Chris Newton with a patient during a farm call.

Reading Leslie Guttman's book, *Equine ER: Stories from a Year in the Life of an Equine Veterinary Hospital* is like watching ER on television back in the good ol' days when George Clooney was still its star. You don't want to know what happens if it's not a success story, but you can't turn away. Guttman's non-fiction work is a sensitive look at the daily operations of Rood & Riddle Animal Hospital. Rood & Riddle is located here in

erinary medicine being performed exists something timeless about the job of an equine veterinarian ... found in experiences such as the small miracle of watching a foal ... get up and walk for the first time, wobbly but persevering. Or in the ritual of an equine vet making a farm call in spring, his or her truck rattling up to an old black barn, past paddocks colored kelly green from the rain and dotted with mares and foals."

Many horse people believe both what's known as breeding for speed and breeding for horses that look good in the sales ring have made for a more fragile racehorse.

Lexington and is a premier veterinary facility for Thoroughbreds — or other horses — in medical distress. Horses' natures are so delicate, it only takes one wrong turn of the foot or the digestive tract to create an equine emergency, and Guttman's work highlights the veterinary treatment of these powerful but fragile animals whose owners make the Bluegrass their home.

"This book is about the year I spent starting in spring 2008 following around the veterinarians at Rood & Riddle, one of the most prominent equine hospitals in the country. It is about these veterinarians' world and the horse-smitten clients and four-footed patients within it. Hospitals are places where life turns on a dime, and this one is no different: I saw lives saved, lost, and remade. I also saw that alongside the advanced vet-

Guttman was approached to write the book in January of 2008. "I was here in Lexington visiting my mom from my home in the Bay Area when I connected with Eclipse Press/Blood-Horse in January 08. *Equine ER* was Eclipse Press' idea. They wanted a book that would connect with not only horse people but a general audience. After they saw my newspaper and magazine work, they thought I'd be a good fit, even though I'm not 'horse person.' Although I rode a bit growing up here, and have been on every trail ride from Half Moon Bay to Lake Tahoe, I have never owned a horse."

"Although my work has been diverse — writing stories on everything from at-risk kids to the environment — thematically, I've always been attracted to stories where there is something

great at stake and where there is also a lot of emotion. A hospital is a setting where there is a great deal at stake, even a hospital for horses, which was part of the pull for me to write it."

"I had written medical and science stories before, but nothing of this depth. The learning curve was steep for the medical reporting. The vets helped me by answering countless questions. Every medical aspect of the book was triple-checked: first by me, then the vet whom the chapter is about, and by another vet at R&R, Dr. Bryan Waldrige, who volunteered to help me out."

When asked how she convinced Rood & Riddle to allow her to observe their operations, Guttman acknowledges the cooperative spirit she found. "The clinic was open to it as long as I just observed and didn't touch anything sterile. After a while, I was at the clinic so much that I kind of became wallpaper for them; they got used to having me around, which was great, because then they didn't edit what they said."

She admits, "Before I wrote the book, I had no idea how accident-prone and delicate all horses can be because of their susceptibility to paddock accidents — stepping in groundhog holes, running into fences, etc — and because of the mobility of their digestive tracts, which predisposes them to colic."

"As far as feet/ankles/legs, if you're talking solely about Thoroughbreds and racing, that brings in the whole debate about whether today's breeding practices are creating horses that are more fragile than those that raced 20 or 30 years ago. I talk about this at length in the last chapter in the aftermath of Eight Belles' death. I don't feel like I know enough about breeding myself to make a definitive judgment, but many horse people believe both what's known as breeding for speed and breeding for horses that look good in the sales ring have made for a more fragile racehorse. However, they also add that other factors are equally important, such as how owners and trainers individually treat their horses. Unfortunately, no data exists to compare the breakdown rate between today's horses and those of the past."

"Many of the stories in *Equine ER* are about horses other than Thoroughbred racehorses. But because this is the Bluegrass, they are well represented. With all the risk involved in being in the Thoroughbred industry, what I came away with is that no matter how much of a business it is, in the end, it is run by dreamers who can't do anything else, even if they've tried. In that way, it's like being a writer."

Guttman was inspired by the lessons learned in her year spent observing life in a veterinary hospital. "What surprised and

moved me about being at the clinic was learning and seeing that a horse's desire to live is just as important as it is with a human patient suffering from a major illness or severe trauma. Like at the track, the odds don't determine the outcome. Definitely some life lessons there. *Equine ER* is for horse lovers, animal lovers, people who love hospital dramas, and anyone intrigued and interested in the bond between people and animals."

In addition, she wanted to give readers an inside look "at this unique pack of passionately committed workaholic equine vets who are also very funny. The place reminds me of TV shows like *Grey's Anatomy*, *House*, or *Scrubs*, but with horses. And you just can't believe how hard these vets work and how high their standards are. I found it consistently inspiring. They

Worries

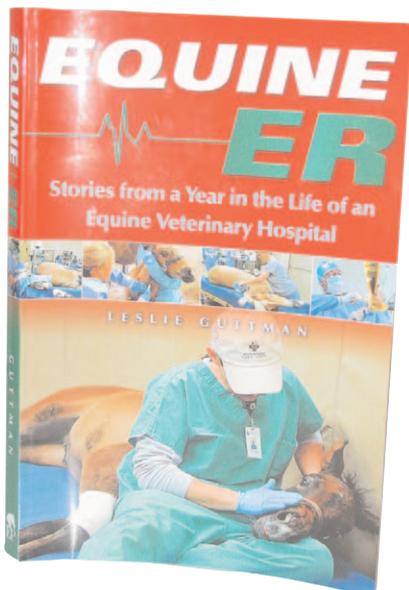
Dr. Tom Riddle's up at 4am in foaling season

By Leslie Guttman

Excerpted from Chapter 14 of *Equine ER* (Eclipse Press, 2009), entitled "Worries," about Dr. Tom Riddle, co-founder of Lexington's Rood & Riddle Equine Hospital.

Even with Dr. Tom Riddle's love for the work and his financial success, it is a demanding life. From January through June when it is Thoroughbred foaling and breeding season, Riddle is up at 4am seven days a week, asleep by 9pm. He hates the cold, and the barns are miserably damp and freezing in winter. Although Riddle is home in time for dinner almost every night, it is not a job that you ever turn off. The other day, while cleaning out his desk at home, he found an old ultrasound picture he'd saved. He was excited, thinking it was a picture of one of his three grown kids. It was of Winning Colors, one of the three fillies that have won the Kentucky Derby. (Winning Colors was also the horse who gave Riddle the worst kick of his life, catching the back of his thigh during a rectal palpation. She didn't break the leg, but the pain and the bruises stayed for weeks. The roan mare died in 2008 at twenty-three.)

But when I accompanied Riddle on a farm call one summer day, I realized



USA Book News, a website devoted to publishing, just picked *Equine ER* as a Finalist in its 2009 National Best Book Awards (category Animals/Pets: Health).



Dr. Tom Riddle (right) looks at an ultrasound to determine the sex of a foal.

the draw of being an equine veterinarian, at least one in the field, no matter how consuming the job or how ever-present the possibility of getting kicked. It was late August; the weather was clear, no humidity, a flirty breeze. As we drove, miles of blue sky and green pastures unfurled before us. The landscape made me remember what an acquaintance's niece, coming to Lexington for the first time, said when she looked out the window of her plane as it descended: "I've never seen so many shades of green." As we turned into the driveway, Riddle said, "These are the kind of farms that remind me of my dad." (Riddle's father is also a veterinarian.) It was a small spread. The barn was black with white trim, and worn bridles hung from a row of hooks next to the stalls. A handful of horses lived there. The family was excited to hear the foal was going to be a colt. The only other sounds were birdsongs and the shifting

of residents in their stalls. Away from texting, computers and cell phones, and the news of a troubled economy, Riddle's job felt like that of an old-fashioned country vet in another era.

Having just left a big city, I also thought on that day, and on others after it with different vets, about how calming it is to be around horses and other animals, how peaceful they can be and how uncomplicated. Most horses are patient. Most people are not. For college students trying to decide whether to go into human medicine or veterinary, those facts can contribute to making a choice for the latter. Then of course, there's always one of the big reasons Dr. Katie Garrett, another Rood & Riddle vet, told me why people choose to become doctors of equines rather than of humans, "Patients look a lot better with their clothes off."

(More is posted at www.aceweekly.com, with video from you tube series "Equine E.R.")

Lexington writer Leslie Guttman will sign *Equine ER: Stories from a Year in the Life of an Equine Veterinary Hospital* at Keeneland Gift Shop Sunday, October 25, 11am to 1pm. Guttman will also be signing copies at the Ace Weekly Gallery Hop stop at Woodland Computers, on Friday, November 20, 5pm to 7pm.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Leslie Guttman was born in upstate New York and grew up in Lexington, Kentucky. She received a degree in journalism from Indiana University at Bloomington and also studied at the University of California at Berkeley. She worked at the San



Francisco Chronicle as both an editor and writer, and her work also has appeared in such publications as the Washington Post, Salon, and Orion. In addition, Leslie has worked at Wired magazine, and her public radio commentary has been broadcast on KQED-FM in San Francisco and nationally on "Marketplace." Leslie currently lives in Lexington. *Equine ER* is her first book. ■

Rood & Riddle

Guttman's account takes the reader on the journey from the veterinary hospital's humble beginnings in Dr. Bill Rood's "one-man show in his garage, the hospital's origins in 1980" to its contemporary setting on the sprawling "twenty-four acres of what used to be part of the old Nursery Stud Farm, where Man O' War was born on a spring day in 1917. The grounds are lush, with plantings such as lilac and forsythia bushes, azaleas and Russian sage, and white pines, red oaks, magnolias, and spruce trees. The practice has more than 50 vets and a staff of over

200 people: nursing techs, farriers, barn crew, business staff, administrative assistants and more.

Rood & Riddle's beginnings, however, were modest. "The staff then consisted of one retired neighbor stocking the pharmacy and a former waitress Rood had hired away from a Mexican restaurant to be its only tech. Rood first met Dr. Tom Riddle in 1981; both men were looking for another equine veterinarian with whom to form a partnership. They teamed up the following year, and opening the hospital in its current location in 1986. It was about a quarter of the size it is now." ■

treat 11,000 horses a year in the clinic, another 5,000 out in the field, and in 2008 performed approximately 6,500 surgeries.”

“One way I describe the book is Animal Planet meets James Herriot. Over and over throughout the year I met people — interns, vets, clients, and owners — who were keenly influenced as young people by the James Herriot books. Many

pital on Derby day, a day she appropriately describes: “For horse people everywhere, but especially in the Bluegrass, Derby Day is a religious holiday. Thousands of people were preparing to watch the race at Churchill Downs or on TV, and between taking care of patients some Rood & Riddle staff members would be able to catch the race in the admissions

a peek into the very human side of the vets who provide care. The book is certain to be scooped up as the horse world readies itself for the Breeders’ Cup and next year’s road to the Derby, which of course, will be followed by the World Equestrian Games presented by Alltech here in the heart of our gorgeous home with the rolling hills and grass



Photo by Leslie Guttman

A foal recovers from a difficult birth, known as a dystocia, in the intensive care unit. Foals in the ICU sleep on mattresses made for people; tasks for each patient are performed at 15-minute, one-hour, and two-hour intervals. Many of the medications are ones civilians would recognize such as Valium, dopamine, and morphine, along with broad-spectrum antibiotics.

of them became veterinarians or got into the horse world because of them. One of my intentions with Equine ER is that it be inspiring in the same way ... and that it is also a postcard from the Bluegrass in the same way Herriot’s books are postcards from the English countryside, describing the landscape, people, and unique farm way of life. I wanted people who didn’t live in the Bluegrass to smell of the air, see the miles of kelly green paddocks, and meet people whose lives are still defined by the seasons. Even with all its stresses, it is a more peaceful life than the technology-driven one so many of us live.”

Guttman breaks out of the starting gate with a vivid prologue recounting the unforgettable history of the 2008 Derby, when Big Brown made his move in the middle of the pack to win, and the filly Eight Belles, finished second. Guttman describes the heartbreak as news came to the Rood & Riddle facility that Eight Belles had broken both of her front ankles, and the decisions that had to be made within seconds to euthanize her. Guttman was at the vet hos-

office. Although they didn’t know it yet, those staff members would see the death of Eight Belles, the charcoal gray filly who would break down after finishing second and be euthanized immediately because of the depth of her injuries. Her shocking death on national television would bring significant changes to the racing world, with equine vets such as Rood & Riddle’s Dr. Larry Bramage playing key roles in the debate and discussion the filly’s death ignited.”

Eight Belles was the first Thoroughbred to die in 134 years of the Kentucky Derby, and although her tragic story reverberated in the hearts of horse lovers everywhere, the event caused the industry to reconsider some options and changes were and are being made to make tracks and racing safer for these sturdy but delicate athletes.

Guttman has changed the names in some cases of the owners and horses to respect the wishes of those who wish to remain anonymous. The chapters give

so filled with limestone, it’s called the Bluegrass. As we prepare for the visitors that will certainly be watching the WEG activities, Guttman’s nonfiction work is a must-read for those who want to know what goes on behind the scenes before and after the best of the best equine athletes perform for the world.

This story is posted at www.aceweekly.com, with Videos from the Equine E.R. YouTube series.

Kim Thomas is a former writer for The Thoroughbred Record and writes about Thoroughbred racing in her blog, KimmyVille. She is also a legal secretary at a downtown law firm, a member of the Chancel Choir, and a commissioned Stephen Minister.