



Dr. James P. McCall ("Dr. Doolittle")

LOUISIANA

Coming of Age

It was a night of celebration and the end of the breeding season for a farm in the state ranked fifth nationally in thoroughbred production.

The state was Louisiana...where thoroughbred breeding has reached a new level in 1981.

At Louisiana Tech University Dr. James P. McCall had just completed the first year of a newly established equine program. The celebration was complete with a birthday cake for the 38-year-old McCall.

A native of El Dorado, Arkansas, McCall had formerly been at the University of Maryland for eight years, initiating and maintaining a similar endeavor. He came to Tech in July of 1980 to begin the university's specialized equine program. The

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program is "the greatest thing that has happened to horse breeders in north Louisiana ever—maybe in Louisiana, period," asserted David King of Simsboro's Sun Haven Farm.

"Breeders (in the area) really need some professional help," according to King. "It took...a guy like Jim McCall here who knows what he's doing." McCall is recognized throughout the nation, primarily for his unique training method which utilizes body movements.

King predicts that Tech's horse program under McCall's leadership will "grow by leaps and bounds."

Actually the program already seems to be doing that. Part of the animal industry department in the College of Life Sciences, the program offers a B.S. degree with a speciality in equine studies. More than 40 students began the program during its first semester last fall, and McCall expects from 40-100 for next year. "For a new program, that's not bad," he admitted.

Essentially, the program he oversees is divided into three main areas—education, public service and research. And since Tech is not a land-grant institution, the main thrust is toward

the first two items.

For a program that is just beginning, the results appear to be far exceeding expectations.

A stallion station, with five stallions, is the heart of Tech's operation. "That is what makes the facility unique," McCall said. "I don't think there's another program like this one in the country. Only a few university programs across the country deal with thoroughbreds at all," he explained.

"Tech is the only school nationwide offering a curriculum oriented toward stallion management," he said, "as well as standing stallions for public service. And certainly we're the only one in the country that offers this orientation specializing toward thoroughbreds."

This year the facility bred 100 mares from across the South—from all over Louisiana as well as from Alabama, Arkansas, Mississippi and from as far away as the Texas Panhandle and Oklahoma. McCall listed a highly successful breeding ratio as the greatest achievement throughout the program's first year—approximately 90 percent conception. "Out of 100

mares we didn't send more than five home open," he reported with obvious pleasure.

Since the program was just getting started, many of the mares booked there were problem cases, broodmare manager Denise Robertson said—"ones other people had given up on." How did the school achieve a 90 percent conception rate?

Some students claim McCall (affectionately known as Dr. Doolittle) knows a few "tricks." Others, like Robertson, give more concrete reasons:

"We palpate a lot. We decide exactly when's the right time to breed her. And we do a complete vet check on every mare, and if they need to be infused with something for an infection, they get it every day. They're just really well-cared for. Every mare that's left here has gained at least 50 to 100 pounds. At the heavy breeding season we teased every day with our teaser stallion—both pastures and barn."

McCall said the success was due to a "whole lot of things," including the veterinarian used by the facility, good weather, good stallions and good luck.

He chose the stallion station route at

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Tech mainly because of financial reasons: "The last few years it's been very hard to obtain inexpensive thoroughbred mares to do any breeding and raising of a product like a yearling or two-year-old in training because the market's been so high in mares... So we looked around and saw there was a fairly strong need for some top quality stallions in Louisiana.

"By standing stallions we didn't have to have as much original outlay of money because we're able to lease stallions and we were able to build a breeding facility and do some things... that didn't cost as much to initiate... We were able to take a fairly small amount of capital outlay and turn it into a production unit that was capable of having a return on investment almost immediately.

"I don't know of another school that stands a stallion battery and teaches and uses all student labor in management positions as well as the more mundane, or labor, positions."

McCall described the student labor process as giving participants "experience and exposure to a model that represents what they would find in the real business." Each student, in addition

to other duties, has two horses to train, using McCall's own tackless training method.

The enrollment numbers from last fall have shrunk somewhat as the months progressed and students found out what hard work is involved. Senior David Nelson of Shreveport, head of herd health, said, "There were a lot of prima donnas (to begin with). People think they'll come out here and ride horses, but when they get stuck cleaning stalls, they turn to other directions." Such work tends to thin people out. "But there's a lot of people out here now," he injected.

It is plain to see that McCall is pleased with his students. "The students, I think, are what we have that's outstanding...An industry to grow needs educational activity as far as staying up to date in their knowledge and what's new and better. And, also, they need management. Management is the key to any successful industry." He feels such students as Tech's can provide that leadership. "If we can put these people in management positions in industry, that industry's going to flourish."

The program will, of course, have

other effects on the horse industry. Continuing education courses are being offered, the largest of which is an annual Racehorse Owners and Breeders Symposium. The first such meeting—attended by 100 owners, trainers and farm managers—was termed a success by the *Louisiana Thoroughbred* magazine. Two days of sessions were offered, headquartered in LeBossier Motel in Bossier City, home of Louisiana Downs.

A racetrack management course is also planned, using the Downs as a model. Although negotiations are "still in the talking stage," McCall said. Downs officials have been "receptive" whenever discussions were held. Louisiana Downs may even fund part of the program, and Tech will be providing that facility with interns who will serve as grooms, hot walkers, exercise boys, shed foremen and assistant trainers.

"Our projection for next year is (to breed) 300 mares, so we're going to have to have about three times the facilities," McCall forecasted. "I never anticipated having that much a year ago—or even six months ago. Not 'til after this breeding season and seeing

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how well we did, did I realize we were going to need to build a bigger unit—not land-wise so much but in holding facilities for mares, paddocks and pastures and that sort of thing." Barn work was about 75 percent complete during the summer, with completion date projected for fall.

"What's happening, to a degree, is probably the program being located in the right place at the right time. Louisiana's horse industry is on the upswing. It's come of age," McCall said. "People in Louisiana have gotten enthusiastic and have had some money to invest, probably due to oil and gas revenue. Certainly, Louisiana is doing better (financially) than most states right now...There's money to be spent and horses seem to be something people want to spend it on."

But will Louisiana Tech contribute to the industry's growth in the state in any significant way? "Sure," McCall nodded without hesitating, "as long as we're probably the third or fourth largest breeder of thoroughbred mares in the state with this stallion station. The quality of stallions we have, even though they may not be the best, is going to affect the quality of horses Louisiana is producing."

The state claims approximately 2,500 thoroughbred breeding mares. If Tech truly does breed the 300 mares next year as planned, "we will start being a significant percentage of the genetic contribution to the Louisiana herd," McCall said.

King sees Tech's program as "a central facility you can go to that's close at hand and find solutions to your problems...It's going to make a big difference." Without McCall, he said, his Sun Haven Farms "would have had a disastrous year...we would have had no choice but to get out of the horse business." Now six out of six of their problem mares were returned in foal.

"We decided we'd let Jim prove how good he was," Mrs. King said. "And he did."

McCall is like his horses—a racer and a winner. "Dr. McCall within a year has gotten all this done," Robertson marveled during the year-end celebration. "He didn't take his time about it either. He just went out and got everything done."

Dr. Doolittle. He is a doer. "He's a big help to everybody," King said. And for Tech and the horse industry as a whole, that means a lot.

—Sallie Rose Hollis