

## Dr. Marvin Knight the crusty, outspoken Cowboys' doctor

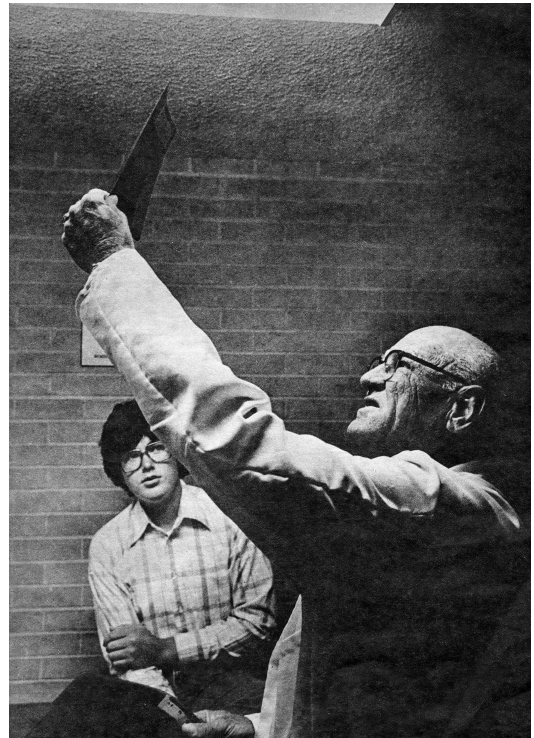
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By Paul Rosenfield

Photos by Andy Hanson

With all the aplomb of somebody about to saw down a tree, the man in the white jacket held an X-ray picture up to the ceiling light at Muenster (Tex.) Memorial Hospital. It showed a fracture of the foot of a 15-year-old boy, seated with his parents in the small room. Dr. Marvin Pierce Knight muttered something that sounded like, "spineless father." After the air had, cleared, he said it again. "Spineless father. I blame the parents in a case like this." Then the boy's mother was saying, "Well, I was really against it all the time." She meant she was against her son having a motorcycle - the one that he fell from and broke his foot.

Dr. Knight, who in his 69 years has maneuvered his way in and out of jobs in a number of areas of this hemisphere, had said his piece again. As is normal, he had stunned a few folks in the process. But as team physician and orthopedics man (bone specialist) for the Dallas Cowboys football team ever since the team was organized in 1960, the outspoken medic has discovered he can't say sweet nothings to his patients, especially to a professional football player. You've got to convince ballplayers that they are tough, unafraid and maybe not even susceptible to the indispositions that tear at the bodies of mere mortals. The spinoff is that the crusty, gray-haired Dr. Knight, four times a grandfather, doesn't pamper his patients, whether they be a 15-year-old boy, a Dallas oilman or a pro football star. Maybe that's why he talks like he ought to be in "Gunsmoke".



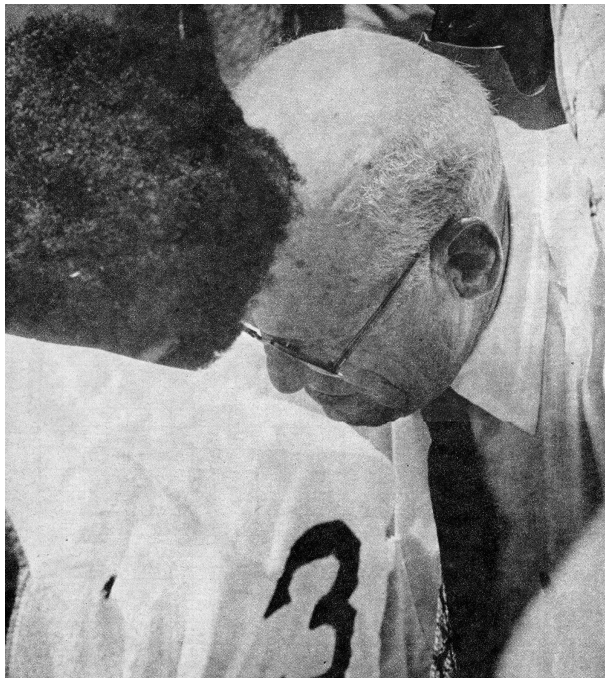
Marvin Knight isn't out to win any popularity contest with his pro football darlings. He just wants to keep them in shape, which is what his verbal contract with the Cowboys calls for. "I don't care if they get mad at me," he said, "just as long as they get well."

But he really does care, deep down. Dr. Knight doesn't want to talk about it, especially for publication, but some of the Cowboys often seek his confidential advice in marital problems, money matters and in other situations affecting their lives.

With the Cowboys, Dr. Knight pretty much has his own way. Since 1960, he has served the team through a verbal contract only. "If the time ever comes when I say a player needs surgery and the Cowboys management disagrees and won't let me do it, I quit," he said. "And they know it. So far, that day hasn't happened."

It works the other way, too. Once, when Cliff Harris came back from training camp at Thousand Oaks, California, he seemed to be facing knee surgery. West Coast doctors had said he needed it. "Well, I looked at Cliff and examined the X-rays, and I decided he didn't need the surgery," Knight said. "So we didn't do it, and Harris' knee today - the one that was hurt is his strongest knee."

There's no way to analyze how or why a football player gets hurt, Dr. Knight said, and sometimes it depends on the individual and his outlook. "If a player tries too hard to protect himself, he's usually the one to get hurt. But two things mainly cause injuries; a lack of conditioning and loafing on the field," Dr. Knight said.



***'Two things mainly cause injuries - a lack of conditioning and loafing on the field.' Here, Dr. Knight checks Cowboys' star Tony Dorsett. Knight discovered he can't say sweet nothings to his patients, especially to a professional football player***

Dr. Knight has seen many of the Cowboys get hurt so badly it seemed unlikely they would ever get back on the field, but the worst injury he can recall was to center Dave Manders' knee. "He tore three ligaments at one lick one year when we were playing a pre-season game in San Francisco," Knight said. "We fixed it all in one operation."

Muenster, a Cooke County farm and ranching town with strong German overtones, still hasn't become accustomed to having Dallas Cowboys hospitalized there. At the end of last season, for example, the Super Bowl champs sent both Roger Staubach and Harvey Martin to Muenster for surgery. Dr. Knight moved his orthopedic practice from Dallas to Muenster in 1971, largely to get out of the "rat race." He had bought some land there nine or 10 years earlier. "You ought to see the kids flock around that hospital," Dr. Knight said. "And the players love it. They'd let everybody in town in their rooms if I'd let em." But he likes to keep the efficient 35-bed hospital quiet, that being part of the treatment. That, and the fact that Dr. Knight's office is right in the hospital, an arrangement he worked out with administrators when he first moved to Muenster. Adversity often results in the 'greatest successes, so it shouldn't be surprising that today Dr. Knight owns the 2,650-acre MK Ranch 12 miles south of Muenster, has 500 head of Hereford cattle, has a new Cadillac in his driveway and mainly confines his griping to the

fact that nobody wants to work at gathering pecans from his 2,200 trees on the ranch. He minimizes the ranch's "two little 01' oil wells."

From the day he was born, his life seemed so full of hurdles that it has been almost like an Horatio Alger success story. "I don't know exactly where I was born. Maybe in a tent," Dr. Knight said. But it wasn't Hall's Valley, in South Texas near San Saba, where his father was on a railroad construction gang. "I didn't start school until I was eight, and along the way I skipped two grades. Made my mother real mad. You might say my education was sporadic, and I guess it was because of the nature of my father's work," he said. Even in those early years, Marvin Knight wanted to be a doctor. "I remember sittin' on a fence and talkin' to a buddy about it often," Dr. Knight said. "I had a great uncle in Dallas, Dr. Harvey Knight, and maybe he inspired me." In high school at Moran, in Shackleford County, Marvin didn't get much studying done, but he was a whiz in athletics - football, basketball, tennis, the pole vault. But when he graduated, nobody in the family had any money so he went to work. He had to save for college. "I graduated one Friday night and got a job Monday pushing a wheel barrow at Hotel Brownwood. It was just being built then." It paid \$3 a day, and it wasn't long before the boy graduated to being a "wood butcher," or carpenter's helper. "Sure, I was a fair athlete, but it wasn't like it is now. The best you could get anywhere in those days was room and board," he said. "I heard they had a pretty good science program at Howard Payne University in Brownwood, and that's where I was headed."



All through college, it was a money problem for Knight. He got a part-time job sweeping the dormitory, and another one at Weedon's Grocery in Brownwood, carrying packages and later doing some of the buying and handling a cash register. Knight graduated from Howard Payne in 1930 with a Bachelor of Science degree. "I remember the dean called me in one time, giving me hell for not making a better grade in a government course," Knight said. "Well, I hated the course, and besides, I didn't have the money to buy a textbook. So I never saw the text and almost never went to class."

He even got elected editor of the campus newspaper, and was after the job for just one reason - money. "It was a kind of arrangement where it cost \$42.50 to put out one issue of the paper, and whatever I took in over that, I got to keep. I had a lot of fringe benefits in that job, I guess you'd say. I got some free meals, free shaves, and even free cleaning and pressing," Knight recalls. He spent very little in college and was putting money in the bank. Modestly, he admits that Howard Payne coaches liked him. "If a girl suggested that we take in a movie, I would ask if she had the money. And she usually came up with it. I was a gigolo, I guess, long before I knew what a gigolo was."

In 1930, Knight entered Baylor University Medical School in Dallas, doing odd jobs, including hopping tables at the nurses' home for room and board. His last two years in school, 1934 and 1935, he took jobs as a male nurse, often staying on cases from 7 a.m. to 7 p.m., and then taking night classes in college. "I even sold a few pints of blood; one week, I remember, I sold three times."

Interning at Gallinger Municipal Hospital in Washington, D.C., he got \$15 per month for one year, but he owed \$150 - expenses he had accrued at Baylor. He needed to get into medical practice to make some money, so in desperation young Knight telephoned a Houston friend who had known his father in the West Texas oil fields. The man's advice, though succinct, was the best Marvin Knight ever got. He told the new medic that the town of Kermit, in West Texas, needed a doctor. "I went out there, not knowing a soul," Knight said. "On the way, riding a chair car on the train from Washington to Dallas, I knew I had to have a car. Years before, I had known the Ford dealer in Stephenville and he was still there." The man

let Knight have a new blue coupe and arranged for him to make 12 payments on it. "I got in that car and drove to Kermit. I was 23 years old then, and when I left two years later I was county health officer,"



Knight said. He had managed to set up an office at the rear of the B&B Pharmacy in Kermit, and even got free water, gas and lights. "You see lots of broken bones in the oil fields, and that's how I got interested in orthopedics," Knight said. "I fixed broken limbs everywhere once, even in an oilfield tent. For months, I ended up sending the bone patients to a clinic in Big Spring for further treatment and analysis, but before long

the clinic contacted me and told me I was doing a better job than they could. That sold me on orthopedics. I seemed to have a good touch for it, and I realized it."

Knight sold his practice when he left Kermit, and then shored up his orthopedics experience with additional training at Stiedler Clinic at the University of Iowa in Iowa City, and trauma training at Charity Hospital in New Orleans in 1938. In the U.S. Army in 1941, he got an appointment to Walter Reed Hospital in Washington, D.C., and then saw duty in Central and South America and in some of the islands with the 218th General Hospital. In 1945, he was discharged as a lieutenant colonel, and doesn't mind saying that he twisted a few arms, pulled a few strings and did some high-powered maneuvering to get as far as he did in the military. "I came to Dallas then, and as soon as I could borrow enough money I opened a clinic at Welborn and Brown in Oak Lawn," Dr. Knight said. By 1960, when the Cowboys were a glint in the eye of Clint Murchison, Dr. Knight's orthopedic talents were recognized as among the best in Texas and his staff had widely expanded. Then one day his telephone rang. "I never heard of Tex Schramm, but he called me and asked if I'd be interested in the orthopedics job for the Dallas Cowboys. We met at Sammy's (a restaurant then on Oak Lawn Avenue) and talked about it that same afternoon. He told me he had asked around about bone men, and had come up with my name," Knight said. On a handshake, which is pretty much the way it still is, Knight was paid a fee for each home game. At first, he didn't make the road games at all, but that didn't last long. "In those days, some pro teams didn't even have a doctor," Knight recalled. "The care the Cowboys got away from home was just awful, and lots of teams couldn't even find their doctors on the road trips. They were out having a good time."

Now, Dr. Knight has gone full circle. After years of making every game with the team, at home and on the road, today he usually makes only the games in Texas Stadium at Irving. He might go to New York or Washington once a year, but Dr. Pat Evans normally takes over the bone duties, on out of town games. What a man like Marvin Knight means to a team like the Dallas Cowboys can't be measured, in the opinion of president and general manager Tex Schramm. "Any man who is a team doctor must have the confidence of the players," Schramm said. "And because of Knight's success with their injuries, he has their total confidence. He's a lot more than doctor to them, too." Marvin Pierce Knight's ranch wagon, 10-gallon hat and cowboy boots are not a strikingly different picture in Muenster. That's pretty much the trappings of all the men. But whether he's walking down the street or having lunch at Rhomer's Cafe, people know Marvin Knight. "I'll save you a piece of that coconut pie," volunteers the waitress at Rhomer's. And when Knight's bacon, lettuce and tomato sandwich arrived, it seemed overly plump. As



customers pass Knight's table on the way out, some slap him on the back. Usually, he can't call them by name, but he makes small talk - "'Hey, you better shape up" - like he has known them forever. "Don't have any idea who that was," he said in a low voice. "Oh, I know him. See him every day, but I can't call his name. But they all know me."

Knight cuts a fast clip on the highway out of town toward the MK Ranch, almost like he can't wait to get home. And that's about how it is. The rolling terrain, its feed crops and its elm, live oak and pecan trees may get to occupy more and more of his time, but he has no thought of retiring. "No, I won't retire," he said. "I've always wanted a challenge out of life, and that's just what my orthopedics work, especially with the Cowboys, has been." He's not your average country doctor turned philosopher, on the surface. Yet he's done so much that he sometimes likes to sit back and reflect. In doing so, he does come up with an occasional platitude. "Life is sort of like football," Dr. Knight said. "You've got to have desire. Why, I've seen people who could be fine football players. They have ability and mentality they have it all, except maybe the desire to win."

In 1937, Dr. Knight married Josephine Higginbotham of Dallas and they have three children and four grandchildren. A daughter, Betty Pearl Taylor, lives in Dallas. Marvin Jr., is a veterinarian in Gainesville, and Walter is taking orthopedic training in San Antonio.