Dr. Garth Lamb has served as the Wrangler National Finals Rodeo veterinarian since the event moved to Las Vegas in 1985. He was honored at the PRCA Awards Banquet on Nov. 30 as the winner of the 2011 PRCA Veterinarian of the Year Award, presented by Purina. He will be recognized again at the Dec. 3 performance of the 2011 Wrangler National Finals Rodeo.

Q. How did you get interested in doing veterinary work at rodeos?
A. I competed in high school and college rodeo; I went to the National High School Finals Rodeo in 1964 and the College National Finals Rodeo in 1967. I was at Dixie State College (St. George, Utah) for preveterinary school from 1965-67, and three of us started a rodeo team there. We put on an unapproved college rodeo the first year. The college president had been at Cal Poly (San Luis Obispo) and had a great interest in college rodeo, so with his support, we became a NIRA member school. We even hosted the 1967 National College Finals Rodeo, which was televised on ABC’s “Wide World of Sports” show.

Q. Does your own background as a former contestant influence the way you care for livestock?
A. I’m sure it comes into play. Certainly, I understand what the livestock mean to the contractors and how they care for them – that it’s not just about the money, they really care about their stock and get attached to them. They are tough guys until you get to that soft spot they have for their animals.

Q. The Las Vegas clinic you founded, Desert Pines Equine Center, specializes in horses – do you see a lot of cattle?
A. There’s not a big cattle population in this town, and no beef industry; our practice is 99 percent equine. Drs. Kevin Ballard and Jim Dorenkamp, who comes from a Colorado rodeo family, handle our cattle work. My primary partner in the practice, Dr. Leslie Schur, was Miss Barnes, and his crew monitor all the livestock closely and contact us with any questions or problems that may need to be addressed. John’s crew is very observant during the daily turn-out of the horses and bulls in the exercise pens; they can pick up on problems that might not have been apparent in the holding pens, such as lameness, wounds, coughs, etc. We scrutinize them closely; if they are not 100 percent – even if they just have a snotty nose – they are not placed in the draw.

Q. What changes have you recommended to help ensure the health of the livestock?
A. Probably the biggest thing we’ve changed over the years is that we’re even more proactive with the health of the timed-event cattle, and we’ve made sure the calves are vaccinated before they come. We haven’t had respiratory problems in 10 or 12 years. Also, we’ve really improved the response time and protocol for handling any emergencies in the arena during a performance. We have a detailed meeting before the rodeo every year to assign responsibilities to everyone involved. Two veterinarians are stationed behind chute 7 with our equipment.

Q. So an animal has a snotty nose or an emergency – what’s the next step?
A. The stock contractors or their representatives meet with us at the pens and we go over the issues. The contractors brought them here to perform, but they are very good about following our recommendations, even if it does mean taking the animal out of the draw. Most of the problems we deal with at the NFR are the same as we deal with in our everyday practice. The animals that qualify for the Finals are experienced and very hardy; they travel to rodeos routinely and this is just another rodeo to them.