



Extension FactSheet

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The Beef Showman: Will You Be an Asset or a Liability?

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By the time a beef calf reaches the show ring, a large investment in time and resources has been made. Attention to detail in areas such as genetics, nutrition, housing, health, and more, can help to produce a successful beef project. Most of this work is done at home, out of the public eye, with the support of parents, siblings, club advisors, and others. Showing cattle takes a great deal of commitment and is truly a team effort.

Now the time comes to put your efforts on display. You enter the show ring to have a judge evaluate the job you have done with your animal. Months of hard work come down to a few minutes of exhibition in front of a judge and a crowd of people. Will you be ready? Showmanship of your animal will be the final step in determining the success of your show-ring experience.

The ability to show an animal is not a God-given talent that you are born with. It is an acquired skill. Granted, it comes much easier for some individuals. Any skilled showman will tell you that showmanship success can be attributed to long hours of practice at home and actual show-ring experience. We all know that high-quality calves and feeds have a certain cost associated with them. However, good showmanship does not have an out-of-pocket cost associated with it. Good showmanship requires an investment in time.

The primary goal of any showman or woman should be to make the most favorable presentation possible of his or her animal in the show ring. To achieve this goal, a good showman will have a high level of awareness of the positive and negative conformation aspects of their animal, current show-ring etiquette, and the rules of the show. If you do not have a wealth of show-ring experience, it is advisable to attend several shows to familiarize yourself with currently accepted standards in these areas.

Basic show-ring etiquette has not changed greatly over the years. All that is required for participation in showmanship is a calf, a leather show halter with a chain chinstrap, a show stick, and a scotch comb in your back pocket. Classes are judged in nearly the same fashion wherever you go. It usually goes something like this: The animals walk into the middle of the ring and stop side-by-side. After a close inspection by the judge, the animals

are walked for a period of time and stopped in a head-to-tail alignment. After further evaluation, the judge will place the animals and return them to their original side-by-side alignment. The animals exit the ring, and the comments about the judge's credentials and level of intelligence begin!

So what skills does an excellent showman or woman possess? We are glad you asked! The following topics are important areas to focus on to refine your showmanship skills.

Placing the Feet Correctly

This is the one area that can make the single greatest change in an animal's appearance. It is also the area that requires a great deal of practice at home before the show — and some assistance from a family member. A one-size-fits-all philosophy does not work well with feet placement. Take time to set the animal up in different positions and determine which style best suits the animal's conformation.

Tradition tells us to imagine the animal as a table with the legs being placed underneath the corners of the body. This strategy works when the animals are aligned side-by-side. However, when the animal is displayed for a side view, a staggered feet placement is preferred. On the side that the judge is viewing, the front foot should be placed slightly forward (approximately one to two hoof widths), and the back foot should be placed back with a space visible between the back legs. The staggered feet placement gives the animal a longer-bodied, more structurally correct appearance from the side. Observe professional photographs of beef cattle in trade magazines that consistently utilize the staggered-feet placement to familiarize you with this practice.

Using the Show Stick

The show stick should be viewed as a tool to assist with feet placement and to help calm the animal down. Unfortunately, some exhibitors use the show stick as a "saw" when trying to calm the animal or as a "crutch" to lean on. When trying to determine how much to use a show stick on an animal, use a less-is-more

approach. Keep in mind that our friends who show dairy cattle manage to place the animal's feet without a show stick.

The standard show stick has a golf club-style shaft with a dull hook and point on the end. All size and color combinations are available. The length of the stick should be in relation to the size of the calf being shown. The exhibitor should be able to stand at the calf's head and be able to keep the head pointed straight ahead when reaching to place the back feet.

After coming to a stop with an animal and before placing the feet, the exhibitor should have a plan. The first use of the stick should be to scratch the animal's brisket or belly to calm the animal down. A sure-fire way to confuse a calf that you want to stand still is to pick at its feet immediately after coming to a stop. After the animal is calm and standing still, refer back to your practice at home that determined the most desirable feet placement.

Keep in mind that all placement of the feet does not have to be done with a stick. A showman can walk an animal into a proper stagger. That is, pull an animal up a step or two rather than use excessive force on the feet with the stick. This is exactly what dairy exhibitors do to position their animals. This practice can reduce the stress level of both the animal and the exhibitor.

When walking an animal, the show stick should be held in the left hand with the hook end towards the ground. The animal should be allowed to walk out at a normal pace. Occasionally, the animal may want to walk at a faster pace than the exhibitor desires. In this instance, hold the stick out in front of the animal's nose to help slow it down.

The show stick can also be used to help level an animal's top or rump. Terms such as "raking the top," "loining," or "pinching the rump" all refer to the practice of using the hook end of the show stick to apply pressure on the animal's back in front of the tail head. This can help flatten the top and lift the tail head. It is advisable to do this prior to the judge looking directly at your animal; otherwise, you will be drawing attention to possible conformation flaws.

Using the Show Halter and Lead Strap

The most commonly used show halter with beef cattle is a leather halter with a chain chinstrap attached to a leather lead strap. The nosepiece is small and round. The most common colors for show halters are black and brown. While a show halter is not necessary to effectively lead an animal, it does add a nice "look" to a well-groomed animal.

There are some frequently observed mistakes associated with the use of the show halter. Proper adjustment of the halter on the animal's head is a key for effective control of the animal. The nosepiece should be adjusted so that it is approximately at the midpoint of the bridge of the nose between the nose and the eyes. The lower the nosepiece is on the bridge of the nose, the less control an exhibitor will have of the animal.

A common mistake made by exhibitors or parents is with the length of the halter strap. The halter strap is not designed to be used as a bandage to wrap around the hand! It also should not be tied up in a bundle. The length of the strap should be based on the height of the exhibitor.

The strap should be trimmed so that the exhibitor can hold the strap at the leather-chain junction and the end of the halter strap will not touch the ground. Parents should not be afraid to take a knife to the halter strap. A long lead strap and a small child are an accident waiting to happen.

It is always interesting to observe where an exhibitor actually holds the halter in relation to the animal's head. Sometimes the showman's hand appears to be glued to the side of animal's jaw. Other times the exhibitor appears to have a fear of catching a major disease from the calf and holds the halter way down on the strap.

As a general rule, the closer you hold an animal near their head, the more control you will have. A confident showman who is in complete control of his or her animal will be comfortable holding the halter close to the animal's head. Ultimately, the disposition of the calf and the comfort level of the exhibitor will determine the proper distance.

The chain chinstrap on a show halter can agitate some animals. In such instances, cover the chain with vet wrap (the material used by veterinarians to cover bandages) to help dull any sharp edges. The wrap can also make the chain more comfortable for the exhibitor.

Moving the Animal

A judge will want to observe your animal on the move in order to evaluate structural correctness. The animal should be allowed to walk out a normal pace if at all possible. An obvious exception to this would be when the animal is very nervous and wants to move at a much faster pace than the showman prefers. This would be an appropriate time to hold the show stick in front of the animal.

The same lecture a parent gives his/her child before driving an automobile for the first time applies to movement in the show ring. In other words, the exhibitor should practice "defensive driving" with the animal. A good showman is in control of his or her animal and is always aware of animal "traffic" around them. Poor show-ring awareness can result in animal "accidents."

When moving the animal, the exhibitor must maintain adequate spacing with the animals around it. Do not "tailgate" the animal in front of you as this doesn't allow the judge to get a total perspective of either animal. Do not wait to stop your animal until the animal in front of you stops or you will have a "rear-end" accident. Always anticipate where you are going to stop before you get there. Regardless of where you stop your animal in the show ring, you should leave enough space around your animal so that the judge can have a clear view from all angles.

Using the Show Ring to an Advantage

Show rings come in many different sizes. Regardless of the shape or the size of the ring, a good showman will utilize all of the space available. Animals on the move should be held towards the outer edge of the ring to provide adequate room for evaluation. A small show ring can quickly become much smaller by cutting corners when the animal is on the move.

Exhibitors need to pay attention to the straightness of lines when bringing their animals to a stop in side-by-side or head-to-tail

alignments. This is an area that is often neglected by showmen and women. Having a straight line of animals allows for a more effective use of the available show-ring space.

Presenting Yourself: Position, Posture, and Attire

The animal is not the only subject that needs to be properly fitted and positioned in the show ring. Exhibitors have a great responsibility to present themselves in a positive manner and not detract from the overall appearance of the animal. The showman is not an “accessory” to the calf but should be a coordinated part of a “tag-team” effort.

The showman’s position in relationship to the animal can enhance or detract from the judge’s view of the animal. When the animal is being viewed from the side or rear, the exhibitor should be standing parallel to or slightly forward of the animal’s head, approximately an arm’s length away from the animal. When the judge is standing in front of the animal, the showman must stand far enough away from the animal so that the judge’s view is completely unobstructed.

While showmanship is not a natural act, the posture of the exhibitor should be as natural as possible. One should stand straight and tall when stopped and walk at a normal gait when on the move. Any stance or movement that is unnatural by the exhibitor will draw attention away from the animal.

The clothing worn by a showman or woman should be neat and professional in appearance. All shirts worn should have a collar and be tucked in. Hats and tee-shirts with logos are considered inappropriate. Some breed associations and other organizations will request that all exhibitors wear similar color and/or style attire. The shoes worn by an individual should offer some protection from the animal’s weight. Athletic shoes should stay in the sport arena, not the show arena!

Myths, Pet Peeves, and Other Issues

- Contrary to popular belief, it is not physically possible to keep one eye on the animal and one eye on the judge. The



1. This demonstrates a staggered feet placement. This gives the animal a longer bodied, more structurally correct appearance.

showman/woman should always know where the judge is located, but the focus of the attention should be on the calf.

- Never arrive late for a class. This will not earn you any “style” points with the judge. Keeping track of the pace of the show is an excellent job for the worrisome parent on show day.
- Always know some basic information about the animal that you are showing. The exhibitor should know the weight of a steer as well as breed, age, or breeding status of a heifer. The judge has enough difficult decisions to make without making guesses about your calf!
- The exhibitor is always the one who should be in charge of the animal in the show ring. Too many “coaches” at the edge of the ring can easily confuse a nervous exhibitor.
- While straight lines are important, an animal that is slightly out of place does not necessitate that the exhibitor circle the animal. Do this enough, and you will eventually train the animal not to stand in place. Simply moving the front end by applying force with the halter can realign many animals.
- There is enough noise at a fair or a show that the exhibitor doesn’t need to create more. Actions such as whistling, snapping fingers, or a loud voice in order to get the calf’s attention or as a means to draw attention to the calf are considered poor etiquette.

The Ultimate Goal

Ask several judges to describe what they are looking for in a great showman, and you will likely get several different answers. This variety of answers will be a reflection of personal preferences in regards to showmanship style of the exhibitor. Showmanship is more than style or “a look.” A truly outstanding showman will consistently bring out the optimum appearance of any given animal that he or she leads into the show ring. This should be the ultimate goal of every exhibitor.



2. Having the animal’s feet set squarely underneath the body is acceptable when the animals are positioned side-by-side but is less effective for side views in a head-to-tail alignment.



3. The animal's rear legs are too far underneath the body, giving the animal a shorter bodied appearance.



6. The halter lead strap should be adjusted to the size of the exhibitor and animal being shown. The strap should be held unfolded through the hand and cut short so that it doesn't touch the ground.



4. When the judge is observing animals from the front, the showman should stand far enough away from the animal so that a complete view is available. Notice that the showman on the left is partially blocking the view of the animal.



7. The showman's position in relationship to the animal is important. Standing parallel to or slightly forward of the animal's head gives the judge an unobstructed view of the



5. The lead strap of the halter should never be balled up in the exhibitor's hand.



8. A showman that stands beside the neck or shoulder gives a background distraction to the judge.



9. When animals are stopped in a head-to-tail alignment, the showman must leave space in front of their animal. This will allow the judge a better opportunity to evaluate the class.



12. Animals that are not straight in line put the showman at a competitive disadvantage and make the evaluation task for the judge more difficult.



10. An example of a showman “covering up” another animal. This should be corrected out of courtesy to the other exhibitor.



13. When displayed side-by-side, animals should be aligned evenly with the first animal in line with adequate spacing between animals.



11. Sticking your animal out of line in an attempt to gain a competitive advantage is poor show ring etiquette.

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