

Impact of Stock Shows on Our Youth

By Dr. Brad Davis

Youth not only succeed in ring, but take away great principles of animal husbandry

“It was truly exciting to see the youth participate in the various shows and to celebrate their achievements with them,” said Burkburnett FFA Advisor Brad Davis. “As a former showman and with a spouse that also participated in this area, we truly appreciate the leadership and life skills the youth gain from this project area and also truly recognize the challenges and accomplishments each young person experiences along the way.”

The True Impact of Showing on Youth

Although the ribbons, awards and scholarships are nice perks, it isn't all about winning in the show ring.

To an outsider the skills or opportunities that youth gain through the exhibition of livestock might be rarely noticed or appreciated. But to a participant, parent, advisor or avid attendee it is truly extraordinary. These lessons in caretaking, not only provide the youth exhibiting these animals an opportunity for success in the show ring, but also a real-life glimpse at running an animal agriculture operation.

Long before the competition starts animals are chosen and purchased for the youth that will be exhibiting them. Depending on the specie of animal the length of care varies from six weeks to sometimes over a year. Youth learn about what makes a great animal and how important nutrition and proper care is to the success of the animal's development.

Exhibitors often find themselves asked a very common question by the public, “What do you learn by showing livestock?”

Responses commonly include, but are not limited to: I learn how to care for my animal; I learn how to select, feed and groom my animal; I learn responsibility by caring for my animal; I meet new friends from all over the state.

Although these answers mean a lot more from the person they are coming from than spoken to, it is still often hard for outside individuals to understand the true benefits.

To expand on what youth learn or gain from showing livestock, this article will focus on a few of the various areas in which youth gain valuable experience and support.

A Family Affair

While attending a livestock show you will find a set of bleachers filled with parents, grandparents, relatives, siblings and close friends of the youth exhibiting. In the preparation area and stalls you will find parents, advisors and siblings working with the youth on getting the animal ready for show. It is truly a family effort and it is something that when asked most families will tell you they wouldn't trade for anything. This positive interaction between youth

and their families is sometimes the bond which is needed during trying teenage years. It is also a great opportunity for youth who will be working towards transitioning into family farming or agricultural units to begin to develop teamwork skills and transfer of knowledge from the older generation to the newer generation.

Peer Leadership Opportunities

In addition to parental and family involvement, typically you will see a group of adults who have participated with their children and families who have since left the nest so-to-speak. These volunteers are great mentors to both the youth as well as new families who are pursuing project areas for the first time or are still unsure of themselves.

These role models help to shape the youth and to also serve as great voices of reason as the youth develop and start to make post-secondary and career choices. Many are active in various facets of their communities and youth can glean great lessons from their experience and wisdom.

Parental Involvement in Education

Exhibiting livestock is one of the few opportunities for parents to be involved directly with their education. Although sports provides some of the same opportunity, livestock showing allows the parents nearly in the ring with the youth guiding and supporting them every step of the way.

Youth Mentors

In addition to an older peer group of individuals to support and guide youth, many older youth are also involved in the day-to-day efforts of their fellow show group. This allows for youth to not only make life-long bonds and friendships, but to also be able to have a resource available to them as they pursue post-high school education and career opportunities.

Youth Leaders

Just like the mentoring aspect, the older peer group also provides a great leadership opportunity for not only youth in the show ring, but also in their local communities. Learning animal husbandry skills, team work, citizenship and leadership skills through showing instills the qualities of a great future leader.

Successful Students

Just like sports or any extra-curricular activity or group, certain educational goals and standards must be achieved and maintained to participate in livestock showing. Because of this students who participate in showing, know from day one they must maintain their grades to be able to show. No student wants to get to the end of the show season after having worked hard on a daily basis with their animal and have to “set it out”.

A Youth’s Perspective

The takeaways from youth participating in livestock exhibition are often best relayed by the individuals themselves. Burkburnett Chapter FFA President Shelby Peters will be exhibiting pigs for her fifth year when this school begins. She references showing to be a lot like raising a family and will have prepared her better for raising a family. “Raising a pig is my responsibility, it’s like my own child, I know what I need to do and how much it needs,” said Peters, I try to make it the best and make me a better showmen, I work so hard with that pig and to make myself better.”

In addition to not only learning the responsibilities for animals and others, Peters also formed a bond with part of her family and made new friends through this program. She stated she had become a lot closer with her stepdad who participates in the project with her as well as gaining additional friends and “family” than she had ever had previously.

This last year, Peters was presented a challenge, when her projects did not grow out and develop as planned. Although she did not participate in the major shows like in years past, she still gained from the experience by learning about how the animals grew out, etc. She will be back this year attending all the major shows and is excited about the future.

Lastly, Peters said this experience has helped her to not only forge friendships that will last forever, but has also helped her to choose a career pathway. She plans on pursuing a degree in ag education and possibly becoming a commodities broker. This career choice came from interactions both in the ag education program and showing.

New to Showing?

If you’ve never been around livestock the thought of your son or daughter participating in this area may be a little overwhelming. However, this should not be a reason for you or your family to shy away from this type of competition. With the help of volunteers and your local FFA advisor, youth with all levels of experience from the first year showman to the veteran can be successful.

“It is a really awesome experience to watch parents and youth experience showing together for the first time,” said Davis.

In Texas, youth have a unique opportunity compared to other states. Texas established a Jr. FFA program, which allows youth who are not in grades 9-12 to participate in some facets of the traditional FFA program, like showing. The FFA advisor assists the Jr. FFA member and their family through participation, instruction, selection, and advisement over the animal project.