

Showmanship Begins at Home

Cherame Viator sets the standard for success in showmanship.

Story & photos by Jen Biser

The first key to becoming a top showman is to realize it all starts at home, Cherame Viator of Camp Cooley Ranch, Franklin, Texas, tells juniors and their parents.

The 1989 winner of the National Junior Angus Showmanship Contest has worked with junior exhibitors from coast to coast, presenting clinics about showmanship and show cattle management. She shared her expertise and advice during a showmanship clinic at the 2005 National Junior Angus Show (NJAS) in Denver, Colo.

There are many crucial steps to developing a positive relationship between the person and the animal, which will lead to a lasting trust. Viator

says she can't stress enough that the key to becoming a good showman is practice.

"My suggestions come from what has worked for me in my programs," Viator says. "I typically try to build trust between myself and the calf before ever putting a halter on the calf." That includes spending time in a small pen with the calf, using a showstick to scratch or rub it.

Gentling first, then halter-breaking are the steps Viator suggests work best, making the process easier and safer. By gaining the animal's trust, there is a lesser chance of the animal bolting and dragging whoever happens to be at the other end of the lead, she says.

Viator points out that when halter-breaking, it's best not to let a calf drag the lead on the halter because it can cause bad habits.

"When you try to lead these calves, at first

they have a tendency to swing their heads back and forth," she says, explaining that this results from the calf becoming accustomed to having its head jerked to the side when stepping on the lead rope. "Also, by having to put a halter on and take it off every day, both the calf and the young person can establish a positive habit.

"The key," Viator emphasizes, "is patience. It's not going to happen overnight. But, the more work and time you put into your heifer, the quicker you'll get results."

"Winning is the reward for taking care of business at home," Viator says. "It takes practice and repeating and perfecting that practice in order to win."

Setting up

Viator encourages juniors to practice walking their show calves and setting their

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► Cherame Viator explains how to set up a heifer in the side-by-side position. She also offered different tips on how to make the showing experience as stress-free as possible.

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feet as they stand side by side with other animals, if possible. "Set the cattle's feet in a rectangular box, with one foot at each corner of the box," she advises.

"This is very basic and one of the first things that you want to teach your calf.

"The next thing you want to do is come back and center the head," she continues. "You don't want the heifer's head to be pulled toward you."

Viator encourages showmen to walk their animals into a setup. "This means stopping your heifer with her front feet square and set, with her back feet pretty close to set," she explains. The process eliminates several motions,

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— Cheramie Viator

reducing the time required to get your animal set up and minimizing frustration for both you and your animal.

There are differences in how to set up the animal correctly for different views — *front* and *back views*, when animals are lined up side by side; and *profile view*, when animals are lined up head to tail.

"Go back to the basic stance when the animals were being set up side by side and we had all four feet on the corners of the box," Viator says. Then place the animal's back foot closest to the judge (toward the center of the ring) outside of the box.

"That is the difference between a profile and a side-by-side setup," she adds.

When lining up animals, Viator says, it is good to give yourself room to move if need be. Don't crowd other showmen. This is a good way to display courtesy, showmanship and sportsmanship.

Show signals

The showstick is there to help you set your animal's feet, but it can hinder you if you are not familiar with working with it.

"Use the showstick to tell what foot and the show halter to tell which direction," Viator says. "The showstick identifies the foot that you want to move, but to reinforce that movement, either push back or pull forward on the halter to tell the heifer what direction you want her to move her foot."

Viator explains that a lot of younger

showmen, due to their smaller stature, end up giving mixed signals by asking the calf to do one thing with the showstick and another with the halter.

She adds that if a showman has an animal that tends to walk out with a quick pace, he or she should try to slow the animal's pace by putting the showstick in front of the animal's face. However, she notes, avoid keeping it there during the entire show.

Swapping positions, Viator says, is one of the more subjective moves in showmanship. "The key to turning in line is to always turn into your heifer," she says. Pull your animal forward, turn the animal's head away from you, walk back through that same hole, and go to your next spot.

"It's minute differences that can make a huge difference on how easy a heifer, bull or steer sets up for you," Viator says. "Your demeanor and movements with the showstick need to be smooth and relaxed."

Knowing how a lot of young showmen can be perfectionists, Viator says it is important to realize that trying for perfection is not always the best option. When dealing with a heifer that doesn't want to cooperate for one reason or another, "close is better than perfect," she says.

"There are times when you want to try not to turn as often," she explains, referring to moving out, making a circle and pulling back into the lineup. "You can get into a habit and want to turn and turn." This constant



► Junior showmen illustrated Viator's advice for the audience. Here, they demonstrate the proper steps to show on the profile.

movement is distracting from a judge's standpoint, and it frustrates the showman and the animal being shown.

"There comes a point when you just have to say 'I'm going to go with close if I can't get perfect,'" she continues. "That's a fine line that can separate a really solid showman from the average showman."

New environments

"Cattle are creatures of habit," Viator notes, encouraging juniors to change the environment and practice at different locations than home before going to their first show. "Don't let your big show be the first time the heifer goes somewhere and gets introduced to a new environment. This is another way of reinforcing and building trust in your animal."

One of the biggest mistakes showmen make is not putting a show halter on their calf until they get to the show, Viator says. She advises practicing with the show halter for two weeks at home before going to the first show.

"This makes a huge difference on how a calf leads and sets up," she adds.

Learning tools

To make practice sessions as effective as possible, Viator videotapes them. The video allows juniors to watch what they are doing in the ring, she says. "That's an incredible tool. It's one thing for me to tell you and tell you, but it's a whole other ball game to see what I am talking about"

Being able to see the difference small changes can make in an animal's appearance allows for a greater understanding of how the heifer can be shown to her best potential.

"You are your own worst critic," Viator tells juniors. "As much as you may dislike watching yourself on screen, you will probably change what it is you are doing wrong once you can see yourself doing it."

Viator says that as she judges a show she will show a young person what to do to improve the way the animal is set up. "Then, while I hold the animal," she explains, "I tell them to walk off and look at that heifer."

It helps the young person understand the

look they are trying to get, she says. When working with someone who can demonstrate how to do something, the young person can mimic the movement, such as moving the feet to different spots, and see the differences that it makes in the animal.

"I also think it is valuable for younger showmen to identify a successful showman and to ask for critiques on a regular basis," Viator emphasizes. "This provides learning opportunities and positive reinforcement."

The look

Eye contact is one of the hardest things to teach, Viator says. "There's a fine balance between watching the judge and your surroundings and your animal.

"You want to make sure you know where that heifer is in front of you so you don't walk into her," she continues. "You want to know where your judge is so he can pull you in."

Viator uses her version of "the rule of thirds" when managing attention in the showing. She says watching the judge should account for one-third of your attention; watching the animal in front of you, one-third; and watching your own animal, one-third.

"Have a pleasant, relaxed look," Viator says. "It's okay to smile, but don't overdo it. If it's uncomfortable for you, it's uncomfortable for me as a judge. So again, there's a fine balance."

Show day

There are a lot of small things young showmen can do to help make their experience and everyone else's a much more pleasant one.

The first is just paying attention.

"Before you show, try to come watch a class," Viator says. "It's really frustrating judging shows when kids walk in and ask, 'Where do I go?'"

Watch a class to learn what you are supposed to do in the ring, she advises. "Identify who the judge is, who the ringman is and where you go in the ring. It will make the show go a lot smoother."

"Fads and fashion are for the dance,"



► Viator took the time to answer questions from audience members at the conclusion of her presentation.

Viator also says. "The showmanship arena is not the place to show off your taste or how flashy you can be. It is about looking professional and doing a job."

Viator encourages conservative showing attire — a button-down, collared shirt; jeans; and no tennis shoes.

"Your attire is very, very important," she says, adding that a good rule of thumb is to look at how the judge is dressed and dress similarly. For more details on showing attire, see "Completing the Picture" in the May 2004 *Angus Journal*.

"Before you go into a showmanship contest, take a few minutes and exercise your heifer," she says. "Unfortunately, sometimes it may have been the only exercise that heifer has had all day."

Offer the animal a handful of hay right before the class to get it chewing its cud and to relax, she advises. It will make the whole day go a lot smoother.

Champion moves

Viator says there are five things that can set a champion apart:

- 1) style;
- 2) posture;
- 3) relaxed professionalism;
- 4) courtesy; and
- 5) an ability to lose gracefully.

"Most young people will learn the basics

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of setting an animal up,” she says, “but these five areas are what separate the average showmen from the great showmen.”

Viator says everyone should have his or her own style, but it should be smooth and unnoticeable. The key is to not draw attention to yourself.

Viator advises juniors to stand up straight and don’t lean over. “Relax and show,” she adds. “If it’s uncomfortable to you, it’s uncomfortable to me, but don’t get too relaxed.”

Viator shared one of her experiences with the 2005 NJAS audience: “Several years ago, a young man named Brady Lee won the national showmanship contest. For almost two years before he showed at the contest, I worked with Brady on his posture because he had a tendency to ‘crunch’ his neck and shoulders when he was showing. He listened, and it paid off.

“Fine-tune things,” Viator says. “When I walk by to view your animal, you need to look me in the eye.” She adds that it’s not a bad idea to jiggle the halter a little to wake the heifer up and make her more alert when the judge walks by.

“When you’re competing in the national

junior showmanship contest and you draw an animal that doesn’t always want to cooperate,” Viator says, “keep your cool. Try not to let any frustration show.”

Courtesy describes how the individual presents his or herself in the ring. There is nothing more frustrating in the showing than the absence of common courtesy, Viator says. “Be courteous to others. If a heifer stops in front of you, help the person out. Twist the tail and make that animal move.”

Lose graciously. That may be the most important, Viator says. “When I can tell you’re mad because you got beat, I will remember this down the road in another showmanship contest.

“The national contest is the pinnacle of your showmanship career,” Viator says. “It’s something that you build toward. There’s a lot of mental preparation, in addition to years of practice. The best advice that I can give people is to watch the contest. This allows the contest to be a familiar process to you, and that will make the contest a lot easier.”

