



Travis Walker, Norfolk, Neb., was named the National Food Science and Technology Proficiency Award winner at the 1997 National FFA Convention this past November. He received the honor based on his carcass collection work, of which a good portion is for the Certified Angus Beef Program.

Walking Away a Winner

BY LORI GILMORE



Learning to do. Doing to learn. These words, one-half of the National FFA Organization's motto, are often recited by first-year FFA members, perhaps later to be forgotten. For one northeast Nebraska youth, they are more than just a couple of catchy phrases learned as a Greenhand — it describes a learning experience that has enabled him to walk away a winner.

Travis Walker turned a part-time job collecting carcass data into a national award-winning Supervised Agricultural Experience (SAE). He topped the Food Science and Technology category — one of 41 FFA proficiency areas offered nationally — at the 1997 National FFA Convention in Kansas City.

The Norfolk, Neb., FFA member is the second national winner in this relatively new proficiency area. As a finalist in the Food Science and Technology competition,

the 19-year-old went up against other FFA members working for wages or experience in the production and marketing of quality foods for human consumption.

His work experience involved data collection for the Certified Angus Beef (CAB) Program in addition to other carcass programs.

"It was a big surprise to be named the national winner," Travis says. Advancing from the chapter, district and state levels, the 1996 Norfolk High School graduate admits he was relieved to hear his name called while on stage at the 70th National FFA Convention in November. Earlier in the week he had completed extensive interviews regarding his unique project.

Learning to do

Travis became interested in this area after touring the local Beef America plant in Norfolk.

"I could then see why the data collected

was so important for producers," Travis says. "I wanted to help."

The following summer, he helped some local junior college friends gather carcass information for the Cattlemen's Carcass Data Service, a program offered by the National Cattlemen's Beef Association (NCBA).

One morning Travis could not assist the group, so his father filled in at the packing plant. His dad, Mark Walker, was later appointed area coordinator for the NCBA data collection service. As a result, Travis' responsibilities increased under his father's supervision. The father-son duo was later hired as independent contractors for the CAB Program.

His FFA advisor learned of the Walkers' work and convinced Travis to document his experience.

"Travis was already working for his father on this outstanding project, and I saw it as an excellent opportunity," says Rick Crosier, the FFA advisor of the chapter's first national proficiency award winner.

Travis worked a limited number of hours in the beginning. Due to his age, the minor could only enter information in the computer at home. Once he turned 18, he could work on-site at the packing plants collecting carcass data.

His work has taken him to four Nebraska packing plants — Beef America in Norfolk, IBP in West Point and Dakota City, and Excel in Schuyler. The father-son team has also been called upon to collect data at the IBP plant in Joslin, Ill.

In 1996, as a junior college student, he logged more than 300 hours, gathering information on more than 12,000 carcasses for various carcass data programs. Over half of the cattle that year were submitted for the CAB Program. He estimated that in 1997 he and his father gathered results on more than 15,000 carcasses.

Doing to learn

Tagging carcasses, collecting figures and measuring ribeyes, as well as sending results via the Internet, are all important aspects of his work, says Travis. Two trips to the packing plant are required for gathering the needed carcass results on each animal.

Accurately tracking individual carcasses through the plant involves placing special identification tags on the carcasses while on the kill floor. In most cases, a carcass moves in slaughter order "down the line."

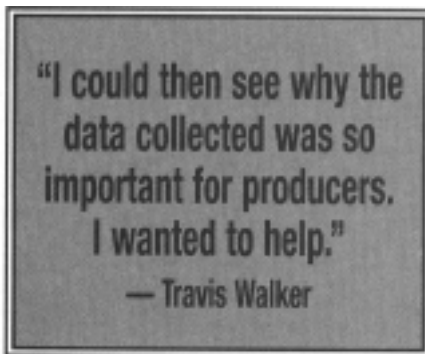
The second trip, at least 24 hours later, involves working in the cooler alongside U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) meat graders and in-house graders. As an independent contractor, Travis must take down quality and preliminary yield grading data "called out" by a grader.



Travis must take down "call outs" as he works alongside U.S. Department of Agriculture graders.

It's of the utmost importance that he remain alert at all times, says Travis. "The grader is trying to do his job and give the carcass a Quality Grade," he says, referring to the rapid pace of the process. On average, carcasses move "down the line" at a rate of 300 per hour.

Travis then must measure the ribeye. This measurement is first taken by obtaining an imprint of the muscle between the 12th and 13th ribs using a special blotting medium called chromatography paper.



In addition to the ribeye imprint, the tag number; hot carcass weight; and kidney, pelvic and heart (KPH) fat estimation are recorded on the chromatography paper. For the CAB Program, he must also identify the carcasses stamped with an "A."

Later, he traces the outer edge of the imprint with a grease pencil to help determine ribeye size. Then he uses an instrument known as a planimeter to measure the ribeye area. This measurement, recorded in square inches, is then placed with the other results in the computer.

Travis types the results into the computer spreadsheet program before sending it online to the appropriate carcass information program.

"This information will be given to the producer so they will know how each animal did in the plant," he says.

For example, with the CAB Program the figures are sent to the Wooster, Ohio, headquarters, where they are reviewed and then forwarded to the participating producer. At this time, CAB Program staff tell the producer which carcasses met the needed specifications for the certified beef program.

Travis says he has acquired several skills from this unique learning experience. Topping the list are improved communication skills, the ability to work with others and the capability to record information quickly and accurately.

"Accuracy is a must," Travis says. "If an abbreviation or a number is recorded incorrectly, it could mean the difference between whether or not a carcass qualifies for the Certified Angus Beef Program."

However, he feels that his greatest achievement is the ability to balance several responsibilities, including carcass collection work, farm chores and school studies.

He feels that his background in beef production and participation on livestock judging teams have proven invaluable. Travis has competed on state-winning 4-H and FFA livestock judging teams. In fact, in 1996, his FFA team placed fifth at the national level.

"I feel this experience has made me a better livestock judge," says Travis, also a

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Walking Away a Winner *cont.*

member of the junior college livestock judging team at Northeast Community College, where he is a sophomore majoring in livestock production. “I now have a better ability to look at an animal and know how it will grade in the plant.”

Travis admits that location offers an additional advantage in this proficiency area. The northeast Nebraska native grew up and attends college in an area with a large concentration of beef cattle. A significant number of feedlots and packing plants can be found within a 70-mile radius of his hometown.

Travis admits there are some negative aspects associated with the job. He alternates working in a hot, muggy condition on the “kill floor” to a cold, damp environment in the cooler. Also, the hours are unpredictable — often requiring an early morning or late evening commitment.

“There is no real day off because when the plants are not slaughtering, we are either doing paperwork or catching up on other farm work,” he says.

The Walkers operate a grain and livestock farm just outside of Norfolk. Since his father has taken on additional responsibilities off the farm, Travis does more of the fieldwork.

Unfortunately the start of the busy season for carcass collection work coincides with spring planting. The independent contractors work every day collecting data from April through August, with the pace slowing after that.

The future

Following graduation in May, Travis plans to obtain a bachelor’s degree in animal science. He is currently weighing the options of attending West Texas A&M in Canyon, Texas, or enrolling at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln.

In addition to continuing his carcass data collection work, Travis plans to someday expand his own beef herd. He would also like to use this valuable training to start his own feedlot.

As for future FFA plans, this former chapter vice president and State FFA degree recipient will apply for the American FFA Degree. He hopes to once again be walking in the national spotlight next November at the National Convention as an American FFA Degree recipient.

The willingness to learn, coupled with an outstanding work ethic, have helped this FFA member reach his goal and walk away a winner.