

# The Greatest Reward

*For one successful livestock judging team, the benefits of their hard work were more than trophies and ribbons. Team members were rewarded with valuable life skills.*

BY CHRISTY COUCH

Hundreds of hours spent traveling in crowded vans ... analyzing pens of livestock day after day ... giving reasons until 2 a.m. to prepare for the next day's contest.... Why do college men and women dedicate themselves to the countless hours of hard work involved in livestock judging? For many, the reason is simple. They want to be the best. They want to go down in the history of their school as setting the winning standard.

Several livestock judging teams have made their marks within their schools and on the national level. But what does livestock judging do for the members of even these powerhouse teams when college is nothing but a fond memory? We posed this question to members of the 1985 Oklahoma State University (OSU) judging team.

In addition to winning and placing high in several other contests, the 1985 OSU judging team obtained the highest score ever recorded at the American Royal in Kansas City, Mo. Although team members followed several different career paths upon graduation, they agree the lessons learned during their collegiate judging experiences helped prepare them for life after college.

**Mark Johnson**, 1985 OSU team member and record-holder for the highest individual score of the American Royal collegiate livestock judging contest, says his experience on the team benefited him in many ways.

"I don't know that we enjoyed, at the time, talking reasons until one in the morning and getting up four

hours later to go on another workout," Johnson says with a laugh. "But looking back on it, it was so rewarding because ... by the time it was over, we were better evaluators, better thinkers and had gained so much from the experience."

Now an OSU professor of animal science, manager of a purebred beef herd and coach of the current OSU livestock judging team, Johnson says his collegiate livestock judging experience has helped him in many aspects of his life.

"It's the most beneficial thing I ever did," he says. Livestock judging team members gain different skills from participation, including communication skills, self-discipline, self-confidence and decision-making skills.

"I think you learn to ... see everything and figure out what

is important," Johnson says. "It's not that having been on a judging team makes you a better thinker or evaluator; it just hones your skills and helps you improve upon whatever skills you already have."

**Livestock judging** also led to more informed decision-making within his Angus-based commercial cow herd.

"I became informed as far as what was going on in production agriculture and what was more profitable to raise," Johnson says. "I gained a perspective as to how things could change over time and could see the animals practical for the time."

Based on his experience and what he was able to see in terms of production, efficiency and potential profitability, Johnson realized the Angus advantage. "I can't find any other breeds that can perform [as well] if we categorize traits such as production, growth and potential carcass power."

Perhaps the most beneficial lesson Johnson learned as a judging team member was the value of hard work.

"If you want to be good at something, whatever it is, you must put in the effort," he says. "You have to work hard at it. You have to set goals. And you have to take a strategic approach to trying to be successful.

"The sheer fact that you have to work harder when you're on the team to take care of all your responsibilities as a student and as a human being [allows a team member] to be better equipped to deal with life when it's all over," he continues.

Johnson believes the alumni support of the OSU livestock judging team proves the ongoing benefits of the judging team experience.

"Someday when I leave here [OSU] and go back into production agriculture, I may be shelling corn in November somewhere in Missouri; but if I know it's the time of the year when the OSU judging team is going to the American Royal



Oklahoma State University, Stillwater, was the high-team overall at the 1985 American Royal Intercollegiate Livestock Judging Contest. The team earned a total of 4,696 points out of a possible 5,000, which still is the most team points scored in the contest. Team members (pictured l to r, with Coach Jarold Callahan [far left]) are Kent Reading, Pat Fleecs, Scott Bulling, Mark Johnson, Tom White, Randall Newton, Mick Sharp, Richard Herren, Greg Dietz and Tom Sturgeon.

and to Louisville, I'm going to be calling somebody when it's over to find out how they did," Johnson says. "I care and I want it to go on and continue to mean in the future what it has meant in the past."

**Richard Herren**, El Reno, Okla., general counsel and assistant executive director of the Oklahoma Farm Bureau, also believes in the powerful benefits livestock judging provides. After receiving his agricultural economics degree from OSU, Herren attended the University of Oklahoma to obtain his law degree. In his six years of practice at a law firm, Herren would warm up for a case presentation by talking a set of reasons. Livestock judging continues to influence his life.

Herren says because of his involvement on the team, he developed several life skills and the ability to speak concisely. In terms of necessary life skills, he says, "The ability to communicate is probably only second to the ability to get along with people."

The lifelong friendships formed while on the OSU team are another benefit of the experience, says Herren, who keeps in contact with former team members both socially and professionally. He met his wife, Jody, who was judging for Eastern Oklahoma State, while at a contest during his junior year.

"[Judging] can have a big impression on your life," Herren says.

**Mick Sharp**, pasture cattle manager for Hansford County Feeders, Gruver, Texas, says his experience on the OSU powerhouse team influenced his life in several ways and prepared him for the competitive nature of the cattle industry.

"Livestock judging put us in a really competitive atmosphere where we really learned to perform," Sharp says. "We learned communication skills and how to handle stress, besides livestock skills."

Sharp advises young men and women interested in judging to attend junior college first to gain experience and to be prepared to work with others.

"You really have to be a team player in college if you judge," Sharp says. "When you win, it is for the team — not for yourself."

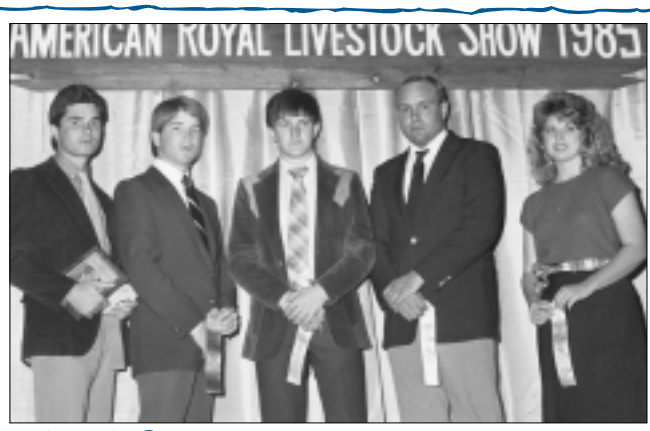
If you want to win, you have to be willing to work hard, adds Sharp. "You have to be very dedicated and willing to sacrifice if you want to win, and that's for anything in life."

**The work ethic learned** by Tom Sturgeon, 1985 OSU team member, has led to success in his career as vice president and general manager of Dollar Transportation. The business consists of about 40 trucks and includes a livestock division. He and his wife also manage about 400 commercial cows and seasonal stocker cattle in their hometown of Hennessey, Okla. "The experience of seeing a lot of the country and meeting a lot of different people and the confidence you gain in yourself and your ability to make decisions has been a big plus," Sturgeon says.

Sturgeon advises anyone interested in livestock judging to prepare to dedicate themselves to the team. "You'd better be willing to work hard, stay committed and learn a lot," he says. "If a person wants to be dedicated and work hard, there aren't any disadvantages."

The confidence built, the decision-making skills learned and the ability to justify decisions has greatly benefited him, says Sturgeon. "It has been beneficial to me ever since the day I left Stillwater."

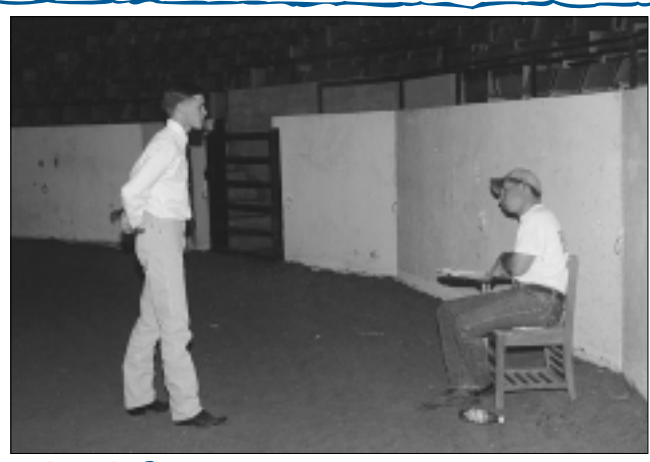
Although the ribbons may be faded and the trophies tarnished, more vivid prizes remain for the 1985 OSU powerhouse team. Valuable skills were developed, important life lessons were learned, and meaningful friendships were formed. These, in fact, may be the most prized possessions for which anyone could hope.



The top five individuals in cattle judging at the 85th American Royal Intercollegiate Livestock Judging Contest, 1985, were (from left) Mark Johnson, Oklahoma State University (OSU), first; Mick Sharp, OSU, second; Mike Tokach, North Dakota State University, third; Jeff Langemeier, University of Nebraska, fourth; and Dee De Starling, Texas A&M University, fifth.



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The ability to speak concisely and effectively is one of the many life skills team members learn while participating on collegiate livestock judging teams.