

The Champion



CHALLENGE

A California State Fair competition emphasizes exhibitors' knowledge of a livestock project rather than their animals' placing in class.

BY ANDRA CAMPBELL

“**T**he desire to win the ‘champion belt buckle’ and collect a large paycheck — to win at all costs and be designated the best — has led some to violate ownership rules, created drug residue and food safety problems, and tempted some adults to overemphasize their role in the project,” says Michael Bradley, assistant general manager of competitive programs at the California State Fair. To address these issues and to help put the focus of youth livestock projects back on education, the California State Fair created the Champion Challenge.

This competitive program is designed to test exhibitors’ practical livestock skills — those essential to the humane and

efficient production of livestock. It also develops problem-solving and critical-thinking skills.

“The program has been extremely well-received,” Bradley says. “We are excited about the expanded format and increased exhibitor recognition. This competition provides a hands-on laboratory for our youth exhibitors to enhance their communication skills and their knowledge of the livestock industry.”

The California State Fair has one of the largest junior programs in the United States. More than 1,000 4-H, FFA, Grange and independent members exhibit their animals at the August fair. In 1996 Bradley decided to form the Champion Challenge, thus giving exhibitors

more than a purple ribbon to strive toward. The sixth Champion Challenge will be conducted at the California State Fair Junior Show in 2001.

“Testing the individual skills of exhibitors is a positive way to increase the educational element of the youth livestock program, recognize superior performance in the learning process and emphasize the individual young person,” Bradley says.

Qualifying to compete

During the first year, only 38 exhibitors in the large- and small-animal market division were allowed to compete. They were the ones lucky enough to exhibit champions in the different species of the market livestock division. In 1997 the

program expanded to include reserve champions, and in 1998 it expanded further to include all exhibitors of market animals and exhibitors of champions in the dairy show.

By 1999, breeding exhibitors were allowed to compete, and by 2000 all junior livestock exhibitors had a chance to compete by either showing a champion or qualifying through an exam.

The 2001 Champion Challenge will include the top two showmanship winners in each species from 2000 and any other 4-H, FFA, Grange and independent juniors who pay an entry fee, says Michelle Macfarlane, co-coordinator of the Champion Challenge.

Exhibitors who win champion

Above: The California State Fair has expanded its award-winning Champion Challenge Learning Laboratory to include all agricultural youth in California. The Western Fairs Association recognized it with the prestigious Merrill Award in 1997.

or reserve champion in their livestock divisions automatically qualify for the preliminary round of the Champion Challenge. In fact, they have to compete in order to sell their animals in the Sale of Champions.

Exhibitors who do not have a champion or reserve can qualify through the written exam. The exam asks basic multiple-choice and true-or-false questions representing each of eight contest categories and each of six livestock species (beef, sheep, swine, broilers, turkeys and rabbits). The top four qualifiers in each species move on to compete in the preliminary round.

Exhibitors of dairy animals — including dairy cattle, dairy goats and pygmy goats — compete in a separate Champion Challenge that is conducted during the second week of the fair.

Preliminary round

As exhibitors enter the next phase of the Champion Challenge, they will be tested, at different stations, on their problem-solving and communication skills. The areas of animal care, handling and quality assurance; nutrition; show preparation, transportation and ethics awareness; consumer awareness and marketing; animal identification and industry technologies; and environmental stewardship and resource management are the focus.

The purpose of the Champion Challenge is to test the knowledge and skills of the exhibitor. Using a lab format, exhibitors are asked questions and given skills to perform and problems to solve within a four-minute time period.

Each station consists of five skill-related exercises for the individual species. The exercises are graduated, meaning they are designed so question No. 1 is the easiest and question No. 5 is more complex. Each exercise is worth two points and is scored as “all or nothing” during the test. For example, an exercise may require five steps to

complete, but the participant must successfully complete all five steps in order to receive credit for that exercise.

Exercises during the preliminary round involve the identification of feed commodities and placement of the correct feed in the container, as well as selection of the most correct feed ration based on a specific scenario and the four feed tags provided. Other exercises involve ear tagging, docking, giving injections, identifying cuts of meat, and transportation and showing techniques.

“We focus on technological advances, such as embryo transfer and DNA fingerprinting,” Macfarlane says, “that are being applied to the agriculture industry.”

After exhibitors complete the exercises at all six stations, they wait while the judges score their performances and reset each station’s exercise.

Semifinal round

Since the Champion Challenge deals with a large number of exhibitors, the competition consists of two rounds. The first round is species-specific; beef exhibitors will answer beef-related questions. The top two competitors from each species (beef, sheep, swine, broilers, rabbits and turkeys) advance.

The semifinal round consists of three stations, each with four or five questions. Semifinalists are expected to have general knowledge of each of the six species. Semifinal skills and questions are more difficult than those in the preliminary round. From this round the top competitors move to the final round to compete for Supreme Champion honors.

The final round

An oral interview is conducted in the final round to select the Supreme Champion Exhibitor. The interview panelists ask several questions based on general agricultural issues, such as labor, public perception, finance, government regulations and water use.



The mission statement of the Champion Challenge is to extend and enhance the educational element of the youth livestock programs and to reward those outstanding exhibitors who possess the skills and knowledge essential for the efficient and humane production of livestock in commercial or seedstock herds.

“This is set up like a press conference,” Macfarlane says. “We are trying to prepare the juniors to deal with these issues. We want to help create a spokesperson for the agriculture industry.”

“It is important to point out that all these exhibitors enter the Champion Challenge on an even playing field, with no advantage being given based on where animals place in the show. We are evaluating kids, not animals,” Bradley says.

Reaping the benefits

The exhibitor named Supreme Champion receives a \$5,000 savings bond, a Bear Track trophy and a leather banner. The runner-up receives a \$2,500 savings bond, a rosette and a leather banner.

The Supreme Champion dairy exhibitor receives a \$1,000 savings bond, a Bear Track trophy and a leather banner. The runner-up receives a \$500 savings bond, a rosette and a leather banner. All participants receive T-shirts and other items donated by universities, colleges and businesses in the state.

“We would not have the success of the Champion Challenge if it wasn’t for all the support we receive from the agriculture-allied industry and other businesses in the state,” Macfarlane says.

Justin Diener was the Supreme Champion Livestock

Show Exhibitor in 2000. He is now a freshman at Stanford University considering economics as a major. He says that he didn’t expect to win the award.

“At the last moment, I decided to enter the Champion Challenge contest and took the exam. The exam wasn’t that difficult, and I thought I would have a chance to make it into the competition,” Diener says, adding he had a great time during the preliminary round — and won the sheep category.

“By this time, I was starting to get excited because I won a \$500 savings bond and a sheep pelt,” Diener says. He was named Reserve Large Animal Exhibitor after the semifinal round.

The Champion Challenge gave him the opportunity to be recognized for his knowledge of the livestock industry and agriculture in general, Diener says. He says that he didn’t answer all of the questions correctly, but in the process he learned a great deal about agriculture.

“I believe that the Champion Challenge is much more objective in judging the exhibitor’s achievements than the judging of the exhibitor’s project in the showing,” Diener says. “Money can’t buy knowledge the way it can buy and fit a winning steer or lamb.”

CONTINUED ON PAGE 190

He says that even if exhibitors feel they are not very knowledgeable about sheep or swine they still have the potential to win one of the many awards.

Angela Johnson, the 2000 Reserve Champion, says that she developed good interviewing skills and learned about species other than the chickens she shows.

“This program is extremely valuable. It gives youth a positive experience to use the knowledge that they have gained while raising animals. The

savings bonds are also a huge incentive. . . . They will be very helpful when I get out of college to get me on my feet,” says Johnson, who also qualified by taking the exam.

More than ribbons

Dustin Bush was able to compete in the Champion Challenge because he exhibited the champion steer in the “All Other Color” division.

“It was a real honor to compete,” he says. “The beef stuff was easy, but I am not as familiar with all the other

species, so this was harder.” Bush says he enjoyed competing in the contest and feels that it is a great way to promote quality assurance.

“What is so good about this program,” Macfarlane says, “is that it has enhanced the junior livestock industry in the state. Juniors are learning about issues and technologies.”

The exhibitors are winning much more than savings bonds and rosettes. They are winning confidence, pride and skills they will use for the rest of their lives. They are proving that they

are true champions of agriculture.

Several county fairs in California and the National Western Junior Stock Show have developed similar programs.

For more information about the Champion Challenge at the California State Fair, contact Matt or Michelle Macfarlane, coordinators, at (916) 712-1963 or Heather Kalino, California State Fair livestock superintendent, at (916) 263-3109 or hkalino@calexpo.com.

