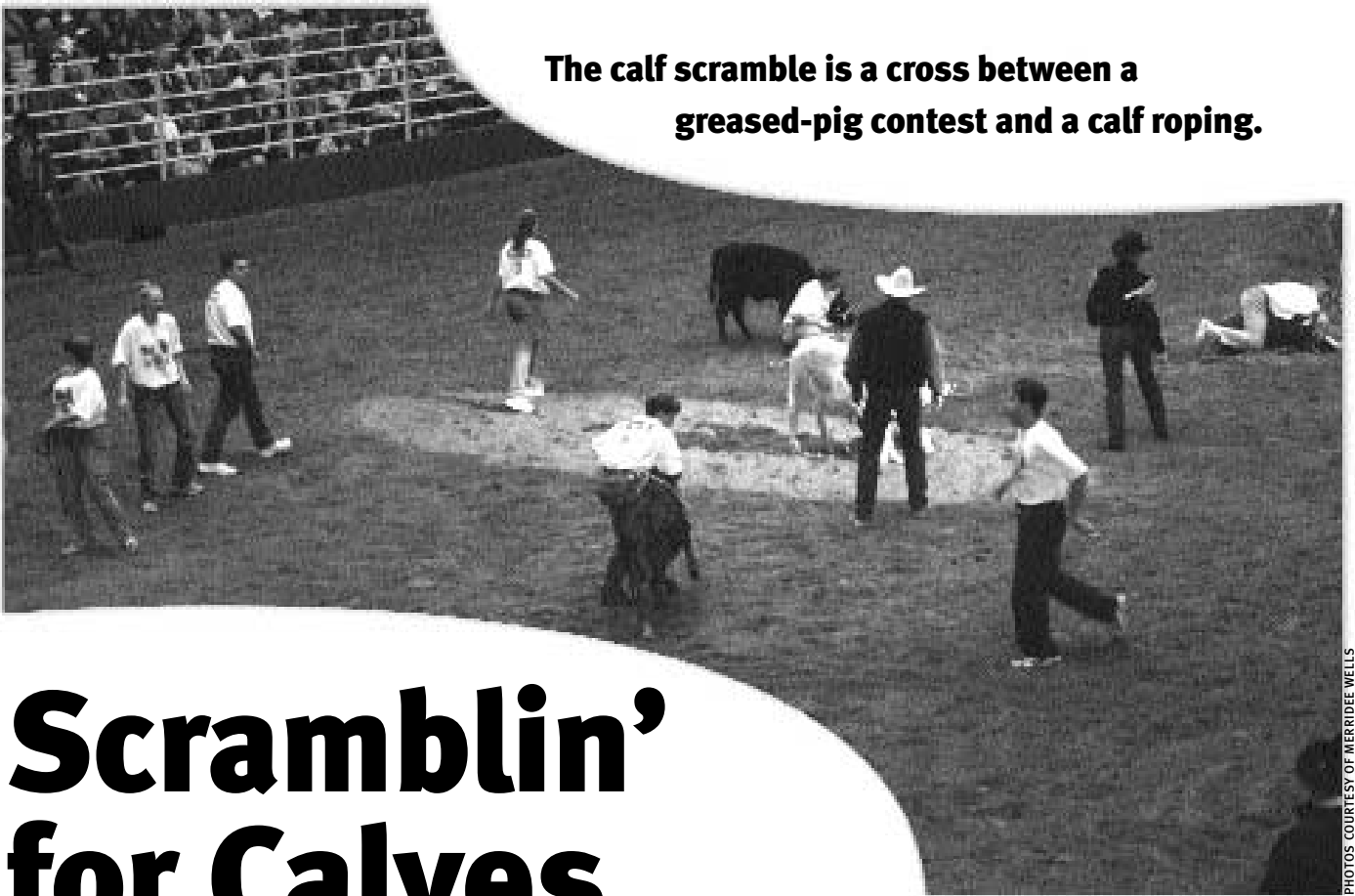


The calf scramble is a cross between a greased-pig contest and a calf roping.



PHOTOS COURTESY OF MERRIDEE WELLS

Scramblin' for Calves

Texas program provides opportunity for youth to get involved in club-calf projects while providing marketing opportunities for seedstock producers.

by *Merridee Wells*

Come stock show time (January-March) in Texas, the talk among cattlemen, both young and old, usually revolves around who's in contention for the championships, how much steers might bring at the majors this year, or "who's scramblin'?"

Now for the non-Texan this might seem obvious; if you're trying to get ready to go to a stock show, you're always scrambling. But in Texas terms, this refers to a 60-year-old tradition held at stock shows statewide.

The calf scramble is a cross between a greased-pig contest and a calf roping. It pits 15-25 teenagers against about half as many calves inside a rodeo arena. The objective is to "catch" a calf by haltering it and getting it across the designated line for prize money.

This tradition, first begun at the Houston Livestock Show and Rodeo in 1942, has now found its way into the entertainment lineup of all three Texas majors, which include the

stock shows in Fort Worth, San Antonio and Houston. It is also featured at many regional shows, like the West Texas Fair and Rodeo in Abilene and the Heart of Texas Fair in Waco. Even counties like Henderson in East Texas have adopted the popular practice for their local stock shows.

According to information provided by the Houston Livestock Show and Rodeo, the first calf scramble included 48 boys scrambling for 24 calves. During the 2000 show, 360 calves, chased by 720 determined boys and girls, resulted in the awarding of 360 certificates. In all, Houston has awarded more than \$6.6 million in certificates for the purchase of 15,719 animals.

Format

While the activity is the same from stock show to stock show, requirements do vary. Usually participants must be at least 12-14

years of age. They can participate through their junior year in high school. While both boys and girls are encouraged to participate, minimum weight requirements may also be in place for the safety of the scramblers.

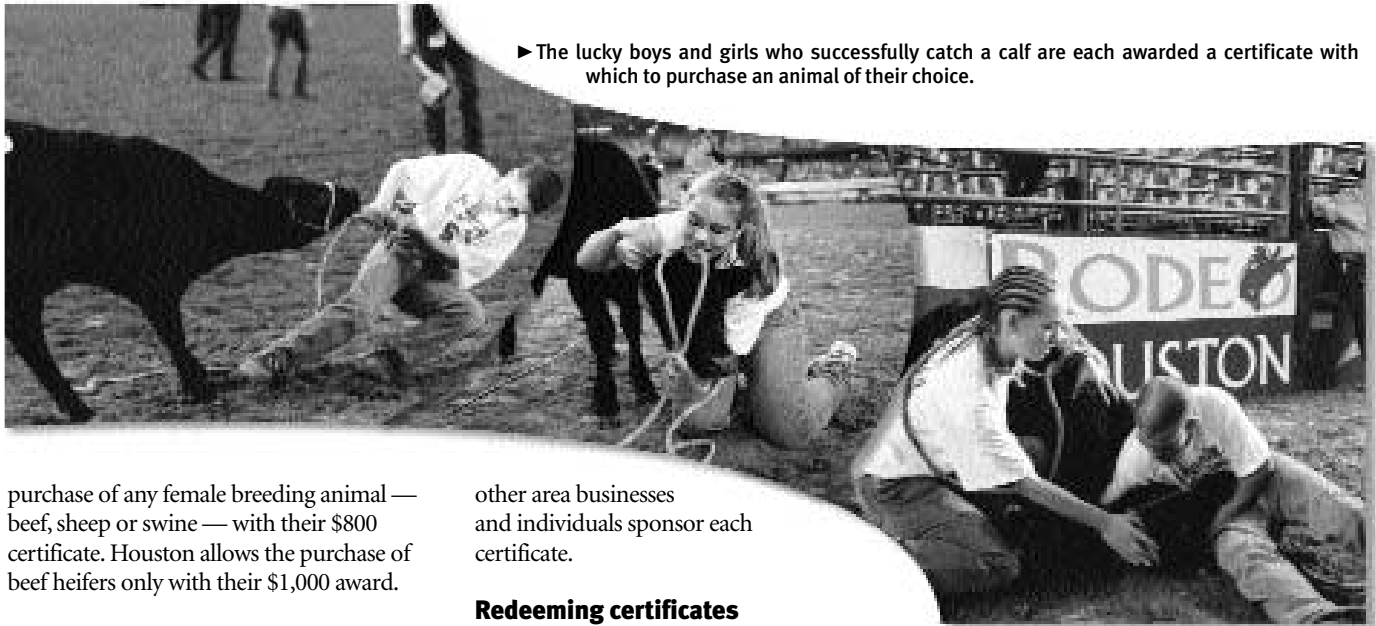
Throughout the three- to four-week stint of each stock show, the calf scramble segment has become one of the most popular events at rodeo performances. Boys and girls from counties across Texas, nominated by their ag teachers and county Extension agents, are notified as to which performance they will scramble in.

Once they arrive, the youths are given an orientation regarding the rules of this chaotic event. In Houston, a motivational speaker will address each group before its scramble.

When the big moment finally arrives, some 20-plus boys and girls make a mad dash, wildly chasing 12 roping calves around the arena (in Houston, that's 1.86 acres), trying to halter and lead them back across the finish line.

The lucky boys and girls who successfully catch a calf are each awarded a certificate with which to purchase an animal of their choice. Fort Worth scramblers may use their \$500 certificate to purchase either a beef or a dairy heifer. San Antonio allows the

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PHOTOS BY FRANK MARTIN, HOUSTON LIVESTOCK SHOW AND RODEO

purchase of any female breeding animal — beef, sheep or swine — with their \$800 certificate. Houston allows the purchase of beef heifers only with their \$1,000 award.

Volunteer support

Of course, organizing the scramble requires a huge amount of support from communities and volunteers. Suzanne Myers of Houston, Texas, is in her sixth year as a scramble donor and her fourth year as a Houston Scramble Committee Greeter. Watching the event during Houston rodeo performances sparked Myers's interest in the scramble program.

"I'd seen the scramble several times and decided I wanted to be a part of the program. So I contacted Houston and became a sponsor.

"I am so envious of the opportunity these kids have to get involved with this program. I do not have an agricultural background, and I've been impressed with the maturity, responsibility and the great communication skills [of] these young people. I can't say enough about what a positive experience this has been for me," Myers says. "I work hard at staying in touch with each one of my scramblers and try to keep up with their lives as they progress through high school. They have been important to me, and I hope through my involvement with the scramble program, I've been important to the kids."

Fort Worth's event has two major sponsors for each rodeo performance — Mrs. Baird's Bread and Justin Boots. Each scrambler receives a T-shirt from Mrs. Baird's. Those scramblers who do not successfully catch a calf, receive a new pair of Justin Boots and a cap as consolation prizes. In Houston, Continental Airlines, one of the corporate sponsors, also gives two airline tickets per performance.

In addition to these corporate sponsors,

other area businesses and individuals sponsor each certificate.

Redeeming certificates

Once the certificates are awarded, scramblers have a limited time to redeem them for an animal of their choice. The certificates are used like cash to purchase their selections. Registration papers are transferred to the juniors; however, they are sent to the participating stock shows and will not be turned over to the junior until the following year, when the heifer is exhibited at the respective shows. Some shows, like Houston, may even ask participants to repay the scramble money if they are unable to exhibit their heifer the following year.

Since these programs began, Angus has been one of the most popular breeds selected by scramblers. In the 2002 Fort Worth Junior Angus Show, 258 heifers were entered. Some 40 head, nearly 20%, were scramble heifers.

Tammy Ettredge of Pilot Point was one of the juniors exhibiting a scramble heifer.



► Tammy Ettredge used her certificate as a partial payment for an Angus heifer. "I bought her last March, after the scramble, and have exhibited her all over, including at the state show, the national junior show and several local events," Tammy says. "She is bred and will calve this spring and will become part of my growing Angus herd."

While Tammy did not "catch" last year in the scramble, she won her heifer in a drawing after the scramble. The name of each youth who did not successfully catch a heifer was put into a hat and an extra winner was drawn. Tammy was the lucky recipient.

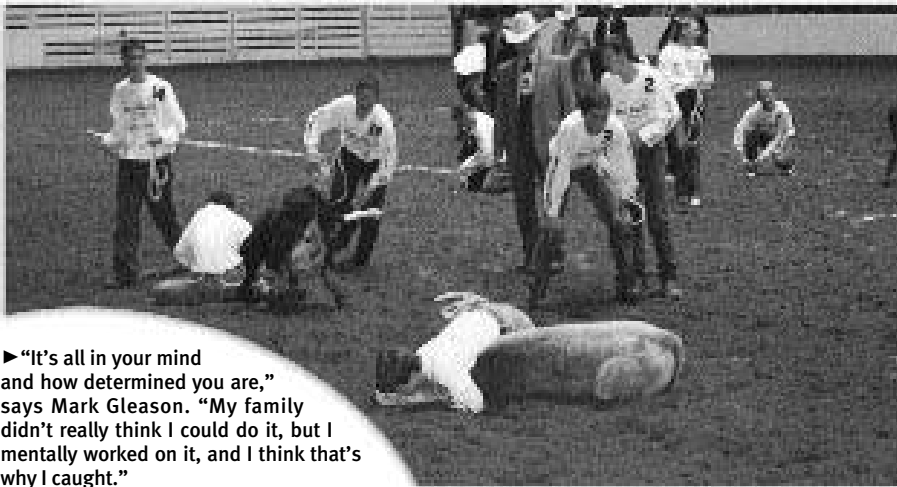
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In addition to returning as an exhibitor to the 2002 Fort Worth show, Tammy was required to correspond monthly with her sponsor, giving them information about her project, and to keep accurate feed records, cost analyses and a scrapbook. This information was submitted to the stock show office.

According to Stefan Marchman, Fort Worth Stock Show assistant manager, the monthly reports and correspondence are all taken into consideration when awarding additional money to returning scramblers. "Many of the sponsors will send us letters of recommendation," Marchman says. "If they feel their scrambler has done an outstanding job, they contact us. The sponsors take this program very seriously. They are interested in the success of their scrambler and realize their interest is important to the kids."

Texas Junior Angus Association (TJAA) first vice president and current Miss Texas Angus Jaci Jagers, Sulphur Bluff, scrambled

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and caught a calf three years ago as a freshman in high school. Jaci's decision to purchase an Angus heifer propelled her into junior Angus activities and helped bring her to where she is today.

"The scramble program is the reason I'm involved in Texas Junior Angus," Jaci says. "The purchase of an Angus heifer brought me to the organization. After attending a meeting, I knew I wanted to be part of the group, to experience everything it had to offer."

Three years later, Jaci has attended several national shows and Leaders Engaged in Angus Development (LEAD) conferences and has participated in many of the junior competitions, including the poster, photography, public speaking, quiz bowl and cook-off contests. Because of her good communication and recordkeeping, Jaci received an additional \$2,000 in scholarship money from Fort Worth.

Similarly, Houston awards additional money and prizes to returning scramblers for best correspondences, best photos, best scrapbook, best herdsmanship, best monthly reports, showmanship, breed essay and end-of-year essay. Houston even hosts a separate show for each breed of scramble heifer exhibited. Returning scramblers attend an awards banquet where presentations are made in the various categories.

2001 Houston scrambler Katy Fuller of

LaGrange was chosen as the 2002 Supreme Scrambler. Katy's story, like others, began when she and 28 other scramblers lined up across one end of Houston's Reliant Astrodome during a rodeo performance last year.

Filled with determination, Katy ran to the opposite end, where she finally haltered a calf. However, Katy's calf had a strategy of its own. Against the far fence, Katy's calf lay down and refused to get up. No amount of pushing, pulling or arm-waving could cajole her calf into getting up. With the clock ticking and the crowd cheering, it looked like Katy might not succeed.

However, in a true act of supreme sportsmanship, the unsuccessful scramblers joined forces and literally picked up Katy's calf and carried it across the finish line. That was the beginning of Katy's yearlong odyssey, which resulted in her receiving the Supreme award and, along with her additional money and prizes, a laptop computer.

Mark Gleason, current TJAA president, is a high school junior from Midlothian. Selected as an alternate for the Fort Worth scramble, Mark was called at the last minute.

Mark's small stature, suited to his exercising racehorses in the summer, would not necessarily make him an odds-on favorite to "catch." However, Mark says, "It's all in your mind and how determined you are. My family didn't really think I could do

it, but I mentally worked on it, and I think that's why I caught."

Mark has twice proved that size is not everything when it comes to the calf scramble. Two weeks after his Fort Worth catch, he caught a calf in San Antonio. "I'm also going to scramble in San Angelo," Mark says. "I plan to put my certificates together and purchase a female for next year's shows."

Seedstock producers benefit

Many, like Mark, pool their certificates in order to purchase a better quality heifer. Keeton Ehrig, TJAA member from Gonzales, was successful in four different scrambles in 2001, including Fort Worth, San Antonio, Houston and the Star of Texas event in Austin. With his certificates Keeton selected a heifer from the offering at Express Ranches, Yukon, Okla.

Since the scramble certificates do not require winners to purchase from Texas-based operations, Angus breeders from several states, are benefited by this unique program.

Circle G Angus Farm in Georgia has sold heifers two years running to juniors from Texas who have used scramble certificates as partial payment for their animals. Manager Tom Dalbey commends the program.

"We've sold some good heifers to Texas kids with scramble certificates," he says. "Not only were these kids excited about buying these heifers, but these were new customers for us, who might never have shown a heifer if it wasn't for the scramble."

Of course Texas breeders are well aware of the impact the scramble program has on the show heifer trade there. Angus breeder Steven Lastovica, Belton, annually markets heifers to kids statewide, many with scramble certificates.

"We recognize the value of this program and advertise the fact that these certificates are welcome at our operation," Lastovica says. "We try and get information to ag teachers and county agents as well as to individuals who might be looking for heifers. We know many times these heifers are the first for some of these kids, and we want their experience with Angus to be a positive one."

Each year the scramble program affects the lives of hundreds of kids, brings in hundreds of thousands of dollars to the agricultural community and helps to develop responsible, accountable young people with better communication skills and a greater understanding of production agriculture. It's a program with big ideals and even bigger results.



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