

The Master's Touch

Experts offer advice for how to master the art of presenting your animal to its best advantage.

Story & photos by *Jennifer Shike*

Lit is the perfect union between an exhibitor and an animal — the unbreakable bond that many covet but few attain. It requires hours of practice and hard work. It does not just happen. It is achieved.

The best showmen are alert, attentive and take instructions from others. They are aware of their surroundings and are in control of every situation. A superior showman handles pressure and constructive criticism well.

If the work is not done before the show, you cannot expect to compete with those who work hard, are persistent and understand their animals. The best showmen roll with the punches and accept the way things go.

No two showmen share exactly the same technique; all have their own ideas. And each animal responds differently to its environment.

Showmanship is more than leading a calf around a ring — the competition is too intense for that. A winning technique is developed from experience, self-confidence, and the ability to understand an animal's strengths and weaknesses. Here we share techniques and suggestions from some of the most respected breeders and past National Junior Angus Showmanship Contest winners and judges.

Before the show

Most showmen would agree that true success in the ring couldn't be achieved without repeated practice at home. 1996 winner Ty Krebs, Gordon, Neb., says all the work and preparation



► The best showmen have done most of the work before they enter the ring, practicing with their animal at home, learning its strengths and weaknesses, and understanding its movement and habits.

is done days, weeks and months prior to the show. Grooming, training and practicing take time and effort. Those tasks cannot be accomplished the day of the show.

"You and your animal will never be a winning combination unless you have been willing to put in the extra effort at home," Krebs says.

Halter breaking. It is never too early to start working with your calves. Even a day or two of hands-on halter breaking when the calf is young will help take pressure off breaking the calf to tie at weaning, says 1972 winner and 1980 judge Bill Conley of Clarksdale, Mo.

Jack Ward, a breeder and judge from Lagrange, Ind., says

proper halter breaking is more than teaching calves to lead and to set up. It's teaching them who is in charge early. Creating respect at an early age will be advantageous in the showing.

When teaching a calf to lead, it's important to reward the calf with your voice. Be patient, and reward the calf for the little things. Two steps are better than none. Once the calf is leading and setting up well, practice using the show halter. Allow the calf time to get used to the chain before going to the show.

"Check your equipment at home," Conley says. "Make sure your show halter fits properly and that your animal is used to it."

Plan for the showing. Time is the most important ingredient for the exhibitor and the animal. Conley suggests spending at least five to 10 minutes practicing with your calf each day. Repeated time together is better than a single hour-long practice every two weeks.

Building trust with your calf is another key component to achieving success in the ring. Once trust is formed, it will become easier to understand your calf and to anticipate its reactions to the environment.

"Good showmen can tell which way their calf will go so they can stop the movement before it happens," says Kimberly Young, 1994 winner from Pomeroy, Wash. "Building this understanding and trust with your calf at home is important. If your calf trusts you, it will lead better in the showing."

When you are practicing, develop a plan of attack for the show, Conley says. Figure out what you need to do when you lead in to get the best look effortlessly.

One way to develop this plan is to set aside time when other people can watch you practice, says Gary Buchholz, an agricultural education instructor from Bardwell, Texas. Ask these people to tell you how the calf looks from the side and rear views while set up. That will allow you to see where the feet need to be placed for the best views possible.

Ryan Cotton, 1998 judge and 1989 third-place winner from Clarksville, Ga., says it's important to familiarize your calf with standing side by side or head to tail with other calves. It's also a good idea to have people walk around your calf so it won't be surprised when the judge comes its way.

Evaluate strengths and weaknesses. Studying the structure and movement of your calf is the only way to determine how to show it to its best advantage, Buchholz says.

Watch someone else lead your calf. Identify its structural strengths and weaknesses. Is the calf somewhat sickle-hocked, straight-fronted or low-pinned? Is it weak-topped, or does it roach its top on the move?

"Your sole responsibility is to show your animal to the best of its potential," says 1993 judge Jim Pipkin, Springfield, Mo. "Since most showmanship contests aren't concerned with the fitting of the animal, concentrate on the things you can change. Does the calf look better with a staggered hind-leg set? If so, how much? Does the calf need to be loined when you set it up?"

Loining (bringing the loin up or down) a calf can improve its profile greatly. Amy Brockman, Brookfield, Mo., suggests grasping the lower end of your show stick and dragging the hook across the loin in an upward motion. When you loin your calf, you will make it look

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straighter in its lines and, therefore, more attractive in profile.

Show day

On show day, it is important to have your calf looking fresh, Buchholz says. Proper fill and a

complete fit job are two ways to accomplish this goal. Just like the exhibitors, cattle need rest prior to the show and should be allowed to lie down as long as possible before entering the ring.

The exhibitor needs to be



► True success in the ring can't be achieved without repeated practice at home. Proper halter breaking involves teaching your calf who is in charge.



► Evaluate your animal at home so you understand its strengths and weaknesses. For example, if you discover your animal tends to roach its top, loining the calf with your show stick can greatly improve its profile.

prepared for the showring, too. Krebs says it is important to look natural. "You certainly need to be clean and make a good appearance, but remember you are not showing yourself — you are showing your calf," he says.

Krebs suggests dark jeans and clean boots with a plain, solid-colored shirt. Avoid excessive jewelry or wild clothes that draw attention to you, not the animal. Your show harness should fit properly. It should not be tight around the chest, but the shoulder straps should be secure and snug.

Most exhibitors wear a comb holder or keep their comb in a back pocket. The needles on the comb should face your body. This ensures that your calf or someone else's calf doesn't injure itself if it brushes past your comb, says 1998 winner Julie Dameron, Lexington, Ill.

Just before you enter the ring, collect your thoughts and focus on being positive. Shannon Worrell, 1997 fifth-place winner from Bryan, Texas, says she focuses on maintaining an edge in the ring by remaining calm and relaxed at all times, but with a certain degree of alertness.

Watch the class ahead of yours if possible. Pipkin suggests studying the other showmen to determine what they do correctly and what they don't do correctly. Also, by watching how the judge lines up the class and pulls in the calves, you will be more prepared and more confident in the ring. That knowledge will make you smoother in your movements.

Entering the ring. First impressions are everything at a job interview. The same rule applies in the showring. When entering the ring for the first time, allow for proper room between you and the animal ahead of you. Walk in sync with your calf. Don't walk too fast or bounce too much. If your calf walks well, then walk your calf faster. Take shorter strides with your calf if it is not as fluid on

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the move. Remember to accentuate the positives.

Make eye contact with the judge as you walk proudly and attentively around the ring. "The first look from the judge is the most critical in forming their impression of you," Buchholz says. "You only get one chance to do that."

At the same time, remember that too much eye contact with the judge can cause you to lose focus on your calf, says Deanna Bloom, 1997 third-place winner from Westville, Ind. Keep your eye contact balanced between your calf, the judge and your surroundings.

When walking on the left side of your calf as you circle the ring, hold the chain in your right hand about 4-5 inches (in.) from its head, Brockman says. If you hold the chain any closer than 4 in. from its head, you will fight it too much during the class.

Always hold the strap with your left hand. If the strap is too long, consider cutting it to avoid having to hold it with both hands. Never let it drag the ground or double up in your hand.

During the first few minutes of the class, it is important to maintain your composure because the calf will sense your emotions. "When you relax, everything around you becomes easier to visualize and comprehend," Pipkin says. "The animal is easier to handle, and the whole experience is more enjoyable for both the exhibitor and the animal."

Lining up and setting the feet. When walking your calf into the lineup, look for high ground so you know where the holes are. Try to position your calf so that its front feet are on the highest spot. Your goal should be to have your calf walk its front feet into position.

If this isn't happening, start turning around about 2 feet (ft.) from where you need to stop.

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When you are switching hands as you turn around, put the show stick in your lead hand and on the halter. That signals to your calf that it is time to stop. Walk backward into the set-up position. Scratch your calf's belly with long, slow strokes when you are stopped. Then set up the feet.

If you are lining up side by side, allow some room so the

judge can walk comfortably between your calf and the calves on either side of you. Brockman suggests allowing one and a half to two calf widths between calves.

"It's common for cattle to have to go and turn around in order to line up better throughout the class," Brockman says. "Give yourself this room initially so you don't

get sardined into the lineup."

In the lineup, be aware of how much you move your calf's head. Don't be a head wrestler, Conley says. No animal likes getting its head jerked. The problem only will get worse as the class continues.

Dameron says it is important to set up your calf as quickly as possible because you never know when the judge will look at you.

In a side-by-side lineup, your calf should be set up with all four legs square, says Tammy Wallace, a breeder from Mount Vernon, Mo. If you line up head to tail, try to walk your calf into position with the left hind leg forward, the right hind leg back and the front feet together.

By walking your calf into position, you should have to move only one foot, instead of three or four. You don't want to place your animal's feet more than necessary.

When moving the back feet backward, use the point of the show stick. To move the back feet forward, use the hook to pull the foot into position. If it sets the foot out too far, use the hook on the dewclaw to bring the foot toward the calf's body in a clockwise motion.

If the calf sets its feet too close together, use the show stick between the feet on the dewclaw in a counterclockwise motion. You can also tug at the animal's halter in the direction you want the foot to move.

To move the front feet, Brockman says she uses her boot to nudge the foot back. If you still have questions about how to set up an animal for the side view, watch a good photographer set up an animal for a picture.

When pulling into line, let the animal and showman ahead of you get in line first. They may need help, and you also want to make a straight line.

If your calf moves out of position and needs to circle, always push the heifer from



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your body to your right. Be cautious to keep your circles as small as possible, says 1999 judge James Bush of Britton, S.D. "More and more kids are trying to make these big circles that take 20 minutes to complete," he says. "Just circle your calf around as quickly as possible and get back in your hole."

Staying alert. Throughout the class, keep your calf alert. If the calf falls asleep, its body will become slack or "fall apart." Know your calf's favorite scratch spots. Use your show stick to scratch your calf slowly on its belly or scratch it up and down its brisket. Rubbing the chain of the halter under its chin also will wake up a calf in the ring.

You also need to be attentive to the judge and the ring helpers so you know where you need to line up or move in the ring. Oftentimes, judges try to catch showmen who are not being attentive to their surroundings. For example, if the judge touches or rubs against your calf at any time, take out your comb and fix the hair.

Be careful not to move your calf's feet too often. "Many people will have their calf set up and then think they can do better," Dameron says. "They play with their feet and agitate the animal. If they are already set up, don't try to overshadow them."

A good showman has good posture and presents a pleasing picture to the judge, Krebs says. Be smooth and fluid as you move around your calf. Quick, jerky movements have a negative effect. A calf knows how to read its handler.

Keep in mind that you — not your mom on the sidelines or your dad in the stands — are showing your animal, says Cindy Perret, 1997 second-place winner from Edgard, La. You may think your signals are secretive, but the judge can see them.



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The judge also can see if you are not having fun. "Let your personality shine through," Young says. "A smile to the judges means a great deal. It makes them feel like you are enjoying what you are doing. In most cases that takes care of itself."

Dealing with dilemmas. Be aware of potential problems in the showring before they happen. The better you know your calf, the more likely you will be able to detect when a problem is about to occur.

For example, if your calf tries to lie down during the class, Brockman says to pull up on the halter and use the pointed end of the show stick to rub its belly in an upward dragging motion. Once the calf is standing up again, remain aware of the judge's location in the ring. If the judge is coming toward your calf, set up the calf immediately. Worry about combing off the chips or shavings later. Brockman says the most important thing to remember is to keep the calf's feet set up correctly.

"An experienced showman should be able to detect this problem before the calf goes down on all fours," Brockman says. "Be able to read your calf and know when something is wrong. Try to figure out ahead of time how it will handle tense situations by practicing at home."

Another problem in the showring occurs when another exhibitor comes up behind you and your calf and crowds you or blocks out your calf. When this happens, Brockman suggests pulling out a little and signaling to the ringman to have the person behind you back up their calf.

"Ringmen are there to help you," Brockman says. "Don't be afraid to ask for help when someone blocks you out. As an exhibitor, it is your

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responsibility to not block out other exhibitors as well. You have a moral obligation to let everyone have a fair chance.”

Part of being a good exhibitor is knowing when to help others around you. If the calf in front of you is not moving, twist its tail or take the flat part of your show stick to bump the calf, Brockman says. “Someday you might need someone to help you get your calf moving around the ring,” she adds.

Answering questions.

Sometimes judges will ask questions to see how well exhibitors know their calves and current issues in the cattle industry. Dameron says it is important to know what is going on in the Angus business and current livestock trends.

Young says the best way to prepare for questions is to study your calf. Know its pedigree and understand its expected progeny differences (EPDs). Judges like to ask questions about feeding rations to see if an individual truly takes part in the everyday aspects of raising the calf.

Bloom suggests answering questions at home to improve your delivery and presentation while building your confidence. In the ring, you need to have good eye contact with the judge when you're asked questions. Work on having good vocal strength and clarity.

Take a few seconds to understand the question so your answer will be brief, yet complete, Conley says. Don't take too long to think of the correct answer. If you don't know the answer, don't be afraid to admit it.

After the show

When the show is over and the awards have been presented, how you conducted yourself in the ring emerges as the most important part of the day. Good sportsmanship in the showing



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is important because you never know who is watching — friends, future customers, future judges or future employers. Leave a positive image in their minds by the way you conduct yourself.

“Respect for a competitor is one of the most important lessons to be learned through showmanship contests,” Pipkin says. “Treat others in the ring as you would want to be treated. ... This degree of sportsmanship not only earns points with them, but with the judge as well.”

Sonya Smith, 1998 third-place winner from Lebanon, Tenn., says that the ringmen can't be everywhere, so that is why sportsmanship is so vital.

At big showmanship contests, there is not a great amount of difference in talent and ability among the showmen, Bush says. Because of this, he emphasizes sportsmanship. Approximately 50% of his placings are a result of a person's attitude.

“I really believe that showmanship contests teach kids that life isn't always fair and equal,” he says. “It's better to learn how to deal with situations like this now. How a person deals with other competitors is important. If you use your talent in a way to hurt other competitors, you won't impress me.”

Sportsmanship indicates maturity, kindness and integrity. Those characteristics show respect for yourself, your calf, your judge and your fans.

“Good sportsmanship shows what kind of a person you are,” Dameron says. “Realize that everyone is watching you while you are showing, and nobody appreciates a sore loser. No two judges have the same opinion, and there is always another cattle show.”

