



Family of Fitters

With knees covered in dirt and sticky fingers of the worst kind — adhesive — four Angus juniors from the Mountain State explain the finer details of fitting.

by Lindsay King, assistant editor

Competing at their first National Junior Angus Show (NJAS), two sets of siblings made up the West Virginia fitting team. Natalie and Marli Phillips are from Masontown, while Justin and JW Teets hail from Lost River.

It wasn't the first time these four found themselves getting their black Angus partner ready for the show pen.

"We show together pretty much every weekend through the summers, so we are together a lot and we do this all the time," team captain Natalie says.

The team actually formed the day before the contest.

"My brother and I have been on fitting teams a bunch, but this is the first time they [Natalie and Marli] have been on our team," Justin says.

The homework

The process of properly fitting an animal starts long before heading to the show. Justin says his family wash and blow out their animals twice a day. They don't use just any old soap to get the job done.

"If you use a really oily soap, the adhesive won't work as well because of the oil leftover in the hair," he adds. "We train their hair everyday by back combing it."

Cordless clippers are just one of the many tools in a fitter's arsenal.

A "rough clip" is unquestionably necessary before heading to the show.

"You don't really want to clip the legs until you are fitting, but most people will clip everything else quite a bit," JW says. "We also clip the tail."

Keeping hair on Angus cattle in the summer is no small feat. It's possibly the hardest — and most important — part of fitting when it comes down to splitting hairs.

"In the wintertime you have to glue the topline because they have so much hair, but not really in the summer," JW says.

The entire West Virginia team agrees, fitting in the winter is more fun because they have more hair on their canvas, but the equipment and cans function better in the heat.

The prep

For a fitting contest, only four people are allowed to work on the animal. When it comes time to prepare cattle for the show, fitting teams will have as many as eight people huddled around the animal at any one time.

During the NJAS fitting contest, each of the four members is required to fit one leg, use the clippers and also use the blower at least once.

"With a huge fitting team, one person works on each leg, one works

on the topline, another on the belly and then someone is fitting the tail," Justin says.

Typically, only two or three people will fit an animal at a show. The bigger shows call for the larger team. It's actually a career opportunity for those willing to put in the hours of practice and have the patience for it.

"Having a good attitude when you are fitting is key," Natalie says. "If you think your way is the only way to do something, then you are not ever going to improve your skills."

Just because the livestock industry is crawling with accomplished fitters, Angus juniors shouldn't shy away from learning the trade themselves.

"You are not always going to have someone at a show that knows how to fit," Natalie says. "It's a good skill to have, and you could help others."

The ring

"The function of fitting is to make your animal look its best in the show ring," Natalie says. "You are able to fix the errors your animal may have or enhance the good parts."

The judge is generally drawn to the legs first. Soundness plays a big role in any type of cattle production setting. That is why an animal needs to be set up and square while fitters work their magic.



If a beauty queen lives and breathes by her hairspray, then show cattle do the same by their adhesive.

“Start with adhesive and then fluff them up,” JW says. That is accomplished by combing upwards towards the body.

JW likes to use a really long comb so he can get all the way to the skin without crushing the hair to do it. Justin has an affinity for a double-sided comb.

“From the pastern down, it is really fine hair and I like to use the closer

tooth side to pull it up and then above that is longer hair that you can use both sides on,” he says.

Once the legs are properly combed out, the clippers are used to make straight lines from top to bottom.

Rough clipping is an important aspect of fitting. However, getting carried away with the clippers and taking off too much hair could prove detrimental when it comes to fluffing it all back up.

The tail is the final piece of the puzzle. A balled-up tail doesn’t

necessarily serve a purpose for most animals, but it certainly does complete the look. As a final touch, Natalie advises spraying the entire animal with ShowSheen® to give them the “glow” for the ring.

When the animal is ready, it’s typical to hear from Justin, “she’s dialed in.” **AJ**

Topline: The legs might be the first thing most judges look at, but a messed up topline will stand out instantly. “You have to find the highest point on both ends and get the rest of the topline even with it.” — Justin Teets

Tailhead: Making the tailhead level with the hair on the topline is key. It easily makes for a sharper, cleaner look. Balling the tail simply completes the look of a fully fitted animal. It doesn’t necessarily enhance or take away from the features. It’s a lot like lipstick: you don’t notice when it’s there, but you do notice when it’s not.

Belly: “You want to make it look like the animal has a curved belly line. If one has a shallow belly, you can make it deeper by pulling the hair down.” — JW Teets

Legs: Start by spraying with adhesive and then brush the hair up towards the body to “fluff it up.” On the front legs, a banana was used to describe the desired shape fitters are going for. “It’s not exactly like a banana but you want it to be a curve.” — Natalie Phillips. The back legs are a different story. “You want the hock rounded off and smooth.”— Justin Teets

