

MARK YOUR CARDS

Angus University offered an informational judging clinic for juniors.

by Faye Smith, editorial intern

1-4-2-3. Understanding how to evaluate cattle is important for any junior involved in the National Junior Angus Association (NJAA), when it comes to selecting animals or making mating decisions during breeding season.

Payton Dahmer, Kansas State University graduate student and assistant judging coach, brought NJAA members back to the basics for the Angus University-sponsored judging clinic at the National Junior Angus Show (NJAS).

Dahmer reminded juniors to keep a priority list when looking at cattle. The fundamentals, he said, that need to be at the top of the list are structural correctness, muscle dimension and balance.

“There’s lots of little details that you can get caught up in when you’re judging cattle, but we want to stick to the basics,” Dahmer said.

When it comes to structure, it is important to have breeding cattle

that last longer than the show ring, which Dahmer said allows them to fulfill their purpose as cows for years to come. Having feet that are shaped correctly with little to no maintenance from the producer provides a good foundation.

“Structure starts at the ground,” he said. “I like to break it down into lots of different shapes. It’s kind of like geometry — it’s all about different angles.”

Muscle dimension is important in both breeding and market cattle. Rib shape allows females to carry calves and steers to reach ideal carcass weights. Dahmer said females tend to have longer and smoother muscles; while males exhibit shorter, more robust patterns. Dahmer said all cattle have to have muscle.

“We’re in the business of raising beef cattle,” he explained. “We want them to have some muscle.”

Muscle dimension and structure combine to lead a judge to think about the balance of an animal.

Understanding proportionality and how an animal balances can be tricky, but Dahmer offered NJAA members a trick.

“Draw an imaginary line right through the middle of those cattle, and say, ‘Does the front end match the back end? Is that heifer going to tip over one direction?’

Is she going to fall a different direction?” Dahmer said.

Balance is seen as a nonnegotiable trait. However as a judge, Dahmer said it’s your decision to select for what you want in your herd or what you like when it comes to phenotype. Producers typically look for attractive and maternal females, and masculine steers and bulls.

“We want them to look pretty in the show ring; but if they only look pretty in the show ring and they don’t work for us at home, then we’re defeating the purpose,” Dahmer says.

Dahmer said contestants in a judging contest like the one offered by the NJAA often get swept up in the competition. He advised juniors to spend less time distracted by discovering the right placings and instead focus on their evaluation priority list.

“You’ve got to pretend that you’re at home with mom and dad driving through the pasture, looking at animals, and picking out the next year’s show steer or looking at cows,” he said. “That’s the same mentality you’ve got to take to a judgment contest.”

Dahmer left the juniors with one piece of advice.

“You might get a little nervous when you walk into that judging contest tomorrow, but judging is easy and it’s supposed to be fun,” he said. **AJ**

