

We've gone full circle with

The Fitting Craze

For at least the past 100 years, beef cattle have been subjected to dozens of fitting fads and fancies. They've been shortened, lengthened, heightened, starved, stuffed, curried, crimped, shaved—you name it.

To the casual observer, it might appear that cattle people don't know what they want. This isn't true. Cattlemen want to make money. But they want to do it raising cattle. Sometimes this often obsessive desire is the result of heritage. Sometimes it's the result of too many Roy Rogers matinees as a child.

Changes occur in cattle almost as rapidly as those in women's fashions once did. Still, many of the changes are just as fleeting. Some changes are not the work of a good breeder, but that of an expert fitter. A good fitter can clip hair to make a back look straight or a head look longer. He can widen a rump with the sweep of a comb.

Some say cattle fitting is an art. Others claim cattle fitters are charlatans—or worse. Yet, most fitting is done to enhance an animal's desired characteristics and minimize its faults. When short-legged cattle became popular, it didn't take long to discover standing them in knee-deep straw made their legs appear even shorter.

Although magic to some, fitting is merely taking what you have and making it look better; taking what you don't have and making it appear to be there; and hiding what you don't want the judge to see. Illusion? Magic? In a way. But most good judges can easily see through any attempt to hide a major structural fault.

So why bother? Well, for one thing, a good job of fitting can, when two animals are really close, swing the judge's nod in your direction. For another, it's part of the fun. It has also given countless cowboys something to think about those long nights in the bunkhouse!

Back in the 1960s, hair was the name of the game. Hereford and Shorthorn people had it made with the long, curly hair on their animals. It was the Angus breeder who had a hard row to hoe. There were more secret hair-growing formulas in Angus circles than at a bald men's convention.

Brushing was a prerequisite. Brushing trained the hair in the direction you wanted it to go. It also supposedly made it grow. At least, if you brushed long enough, you had to believe it was growing. Brushing also gave the animal science students at Penn State something to do between classes.

Geography also was thought to play some part in hair growth. The Hudson River Valley was a great place to grow hair, it was thought. Some breeders even moved their herds in hopes of growing more hair. Because the valley had cool damp nights even

in summer, breeders tried to duplicate this atmosphere elsewhere. Barns were equipped with fans and sprinkler systems that sprayed water over the backs of cattle constantly. Wealthy herd owners even took sprinkler systems to the shows.

Once the hair was grown, grooming it was the next problem. In the beginning, a little olive oil and a lot of brushing was all that was required to get hair to stand on end. Then the real artists took over. Using a variety of tools, the most important of which was the liner (a metal comb consisting of two or more rows of serrated metal strips), these artists created patterns, sometimes on the hindquarter or shoulders only, sometimes all over. Straight lines, criss-cross lines, wavy lines, squares, diamonds—the possibilities were endless.

At some small county fairs where competition was scarce, an animal could be brought out of the ring, a quick change done on its hair pattern, and—like magic—a new animal for the next class.

Somewhere along the line it was decided beef cattle needed heavier bone, something that proved easier for the fitter to accomplish than the breeder. Train the leg hair forward and up, then find something to make it stay. One of the first products used was butch wax, that goop teenagers used on their short haircuts. Some fitters preferred another product called Dixie Peach. But wax softens in summer heat, so an enterprising herdsman experimented and Herdsman's Dream was born, followed by Patterson Peach and a host of other products both homemade and manufactured. The final refinement came when these products were made in various colors to match the animals hair.

An incredible variety of materials have been used to set, shine and color hair over the years. Even now, when hair is not needed in abundance since a slim, streamlined animal is desired, a wondrous collection of concoctions can be found at any show: hair-spray, beer, mayonnaise, spray paint, graphite, automotive adhesive, boot black, spray deodorant and mineral oil, just to name a few. Even glitter sparkles have been added on occasion to make some bovine stars shine.

Nurse cows were also a part of the art of fitting at one time. This was during the "fat" era. Some show strings had more nurse cows than show cattle and a few beef shows looked as if they were being held in conjunction with a dairy show.

The fat, dumpy era gave rise to its own special fitting devices. (Or should I say vices?). Oil, water, gel and other substances were sometimes injected under the skin to "fatten" an animal. A whole rear end could be built this way. But woe to the hapless



by Caryl Velisek

For Caryl Velisek of Woodbine, Md., the world revolves around Angus cattle more often than not. Veteran state association secretary as well as wife and mother to a family as addicted as herself, Caryl also finds time to write for the Delmarva Farmer . . . between shows, of course. Her stories on these two pages will delight cattle show enthusiasts.

showman whose "filled" animal turned stubborn in the ring and needed a slap from a ringman or fellow exhibitor. The resulting sound was a dead give away!

The "tall" era has had its own innovations. I've heard of plywood being glued to the bottom of hooves to add height and polls have been twisted to dizzying heights.

Tails have always been a prime target for imaginative fitting jobs. Years ago, long flowing tails were the style to make the popular fat rumps look fatter. Sparse and missing tails were replaced with false switches that could be bought at almost any livestock supply store. The present practice of balling tails grew from the efforts of herdsman to expose more leg and a leaner, shallower rump. Balling tails is a specialized art form, and a good "tail" man or woman is always in great demand at shows.

When a top-notch fitter gets a reputation, he is emulated, sometimes to the point of the ridiculous. A case in point is the "tail fin" craze that swept the show ring briefly a few years back. In an effort to hide a sloping rump, a fitter brushed a calf's tail head hairs as high as he could and clipped them to a point slanting upwards from the spine. This offset the slope and made the rump appear straighter. The calf did well in the shows and before long, show calves were sporting the highest, craziest tail fins you ever saw! The ultimate came when baling twine was untwisted and glued to the tail heads, clipped to a point, and painted to match the hair. Some fins were so high, the animal actually appeared deformed.

At least one judge remarked he was glad he selected the champion before a good wind came along, for the calf would surely have taken off with the help of that tail fin! The fins were soon outlawed along with anything else unnatural.

The imagination displayed by fitters over the years has been incredible. It has rivaled the imagination of creators of science fiction. Ranging from the practical to the ridiculous, some fitting practices have been passing fancies, other have remained tried and true methods of enhancement. One thing is certain, as long as there's a show and a cowboy, there'll always be a new idea how to make a calf look better. **AJ**