

The Next Generation

Ag education fosters youths' business skills.

by Barb Baylor Anderson

Experience may be the best teacher, but young Illinois Angus enthusiasts say the classroom is not a bad place to polish skills in beef production and business as well.

Trever Kuipers, Onarga, Ill., 21, has experienced the benefits of ag education through high school, junior college and at the University of Illinois–Urbana-Champaign, which he now attends. He plans to further his education in veterinary or graduate school after receiving an animal science degree in 2004.

"I was exposed to my first agricultural education experience on the first day of my freshman year in high school," he says. "I was already being raised with a passion for agriculture, and agricultural education has helped build my interest in Angus production. The two areas definitely intertwine with each other."

Kuipers' educational experiences have been enhanced by participation in FFA Career Development Events (CDEs) and record-book interviews. Over the years, he has received several awards, including the District II Beef Production Award in 2000, and has served in many leadership positions at the FFA chapter and section levels. He is also a current National Junior Angus Association (NJAA) director and past president of the Illinois Junior Angus Association.

Kuipers says his educational interests were sparked at home, where he grew up on a grain and commercial-Angus farm. His father and grandfather ran approximately 80 head of Angus breeding stock and retained ownership of the offspring through a self-owned feedlot. Although the cow herd was dispersed when Kuipers was 8, the family retained a few cows to raise for show cattle for Trever and his sister.

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— Justin Moritz

"I loved showing cattle, so I decided to build up my own cow herd by keeping show heifers and breeding them," he says. "Through that experience, I have gained knowledge of the Angus industry and how to use artificial insemination (AI) and embryo transfer (ET) to select for superior genetics. At the same time, through my coursework and FFA I have learned proper recordkeeping, different sales techniques, customer relations and genetic selection."

Making the most of the classroom

Jim Craft, executive secretary, Illinois FFA, Springfield, says that Kuipers' experience is not unusual for students and that it can be a valuable long-term asset.

"It is good to tie practical experience with classroom experience when it comes to beef production. Agricultural education does a wonderful job of serving every student's learning style by blending classroom instruction, supervised agricultural experience (SAE) programs and FFA into a comprehensive instructional program," he says.



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PHOTOS BY SHEILA STANNARD



► "As a freshman I knew that I wanted to take an agriculture class and be involved in the FFA," says Justin Moritz (left). "What I did not know was how much fun I would have doing it."

PHOTO COURTESY OF THE MORITZ FAMILY

of Angus Breeders

Classroom instruction provides students with the critical science concepts that prepare them to work with animals, Craft adds. Concepts on nutrition, sanitation, genetics, health and other basic management skills are presented through lecture, demonstration, labs and reading.

"Students learn differently. Some can read and absorb information, and others can practice a lesson in a hands-on application and learn. Still others are motivated to learn when placed in a competitive or team situation, and others

require a bit of each to learn most clearly," he says.

Students are encouraged to take that foundation and build on it with real-life experiences in their SAE and to track their progress in record books, Craft explains.

"FFA provides students opportunities to compare their progress to others, not by a grade on the report card, but by having teachers evaluate and compare their SAE programs to [those of] students from other area schools," Craft says. "Education is presented in a hands-on environment where

students receive feedback on their success and are motivated by the opportunity for reward and recognition. It promotes learning and challenges students to grow their operation."

Good to gain practical experience

Tyler Gruhn, 15, from Lanark, Ill., is already beginning to see some rewards from agricultural education. The high school freshman believes FFA will help him develop the skills he needs to complement practical experience.

"FFA can teach you the importance of records. We are currently working on inventory of our business and net worth statements. Knowing production costs and keeping track of all expenses is very important to the business side of beef production," he says. "Another important part of ag education is communication and working together. FFA can help you develop many valuable assets for the future."

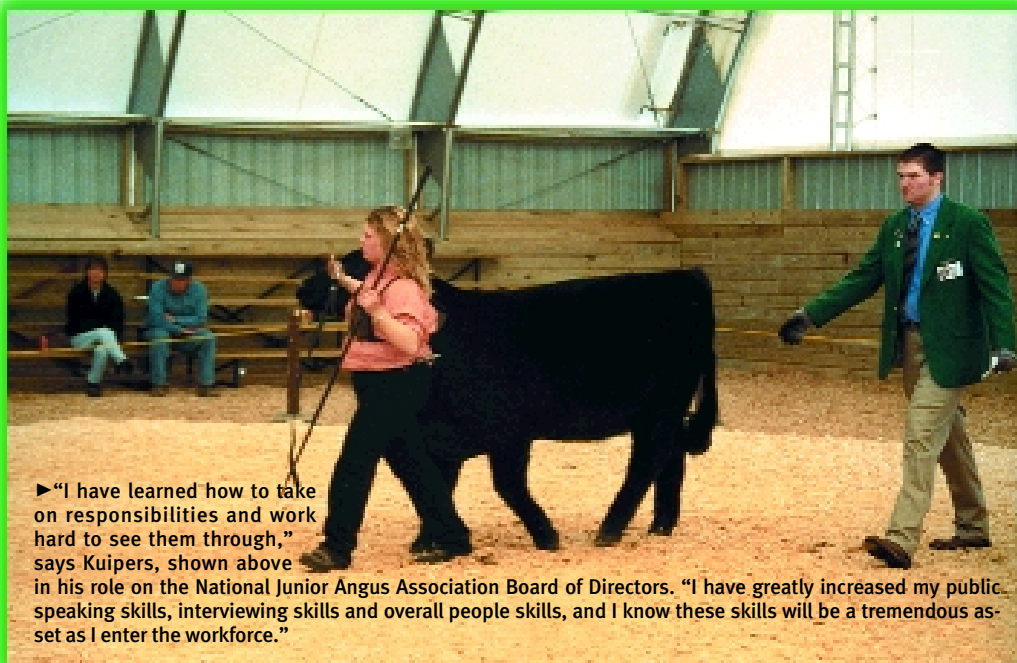
Gruhn's family has an Angus-based cow-calf operation and grain farm that produces purebred Angus and crossbred show calves for Gruhn and other 4-H and FFA members. Gruhn has been successful in the showing, having raised multiple champion steers over the last few years. His 2002 champion steer was purchased by Beach's

Supper Club, Lena, Ill.; graded USDA Prime; and was served during a recent "Youth in Agriculture" weekend.

"My favorite part of the business is the showing," Gruhn admits. "I have learned that the cattle business is not a 9-to-5 job. It is very unpredictable, and your heifer always starts to calve when you have something planned on Saturday night. But you learn by doing, and you have to be flexible and take care of business. That is the dedication and commitment you must have to be successful."

Justin Moritz, 17, Piper City, Ill., shares that philosophy and has had similar experiences that are helping to prepare him for a future in Angus production.

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► "I have learned how to take on responsibilities and work hard to see them through," says Kuipers, shown above in his role on the National Junior Angus Association Board of Directors. "I have greatly increased my public speaking skills, interviewing skills and overall people skills, and I know these skills will be a tremendous asset as I enter the workforce."

► "FFA can teach you the importance of records. We are currently working on inventory of our business and net worth statements," says Tyler Gruhn (far right). "Knowing production costs and keeping track of all expenses is very important to the business side of beef production."



PHOTO COURTESY OF THE TYLER GRUHN FAMILY

"As a freshman I knew that I wanted to take an agriculture class and be involved in the FFA," Moritz says. "What I did not know was how much fun I would have doing it. I have learned how to do many small jobs and some very difficult ones also. You don't just learn about one thing, you learn how the world works because of agriculture."

Moritz's father and uncle operated a 100-head cow-calf operation that has since become a 100% Angus operation. Today, the herd consists of 44 Angus cows.

"By the time I was old enough to start showing cattle, we went to raising strictly Angus," says Moritz, whose family won the junior Angus heifer show in 2000 during their first trip to the Illinois State Fair. "My love for Angus cattle began to grow with my first heifer. My interest in this breed is based on the pureness and outstanding characteristics that Angus cattle possess."

Moritz has found that the classroom provides knowledge about finding protein percentages for show-calf rations, skills for judging cattle and proper record management.

"Being involved in FFA has allowed me to learn how to keep very good records," he says. "Also, by keeping base-EPD (expected progeny difference) information, the breed allows you to choose the bulls and heifers that can enhance the quality of your herd's EPDs, carcass quality and other traits you desire."

Helping students help themselves

Craft says student classroom experience can be further enhanced through the involvement of knowledgeable adults.

Moritz says his ag teacher has had a tremendous influence on his interest, and Gruhn says that Angus breeders have been a good source of breeding, nutrition, judging, fitting and showmanship information.

"Parents and local leaders have a tremendous impact on local agricultural education," Craft says. "With the increasing diversity of the agriculture industry, local teachers are required to work hard to keep up their skills in all areas. Adults who volunteer as presenters in areas such as ET, marketing or selection help the classroom instructor. Offering to have students job-shadow as part of their SAE or through part-time employment in businesses or on farms are also wonderful contributions."

Craft encourages Angus breeders to work with local agricultural educators to get local advisory committees in place. He says such committees can assess the needs of the local community, and assist the teacher in developing or revising the agricultural education program to meet those needs. He adds that FFA alumni can also be a valuable support group at local, state and national levels.

Likewise, students can offer input to program leaders and other students about ag education's role in building the next

successful generation of Angus breeders.

"Ag education and Angus cattle have already had a huge impact on my future," Moritz says. "Agricultural education has allowed my love for agriculture to grow and blossom, and the Angus business has allowed me to adapt to a lifestyle that involves cattle and people from all over the United States. The best advice I can give other students is to be involved. Don't just sit back on your heels and let everyone else do your work for you."

Kuipers agrees that young people must get involved for agricultural education to have a positive impact on their Angus business plans. "I have learned how to take on responsibilities and work hard to see them through. I have greatly increased my public speaking skills, interviewing skills and overall people skills, and I know these skills will be a tremendous asset as I enter the work force," he says. "No matter what your passion, there is no greater tool than education. And I think that by planting your roots in agriculture, you can grow into anything."



The agricultural education edge

Agricultural education is a veritable breeding ground for future career success, says Jim Craft, executive secretary of Illinois FFA, Springfield. Consider the following facts:

- ▶ 90% of FFA members participate in sports, school and community activities vs. 77% of typical students.
- ▶ 91% of FFA members vs. 66% of typical students relate personal effort to personal success.
- ▶ 93% of FFA members believe it's important to do their best vs. 73% of typical students.
- ▶ 83% of FFA members say courses are exciting vs. 32% of typical students. About two-thirds of FFA members vs. 55% of typical students think courses are challenging, and 88% vs. 49% think courses are interesting.
- ▶ For the 1999-2000 school year, 86.8% of FFA members were employed vs. 61.5% of typical students.
- ▶ 89% of FFA members believe in career success and are optimistic about the future vs. 68% of other students.

Source: Horatio Alger Association/
Purdue University, 1999