



# Shooting for the Moon

Indiana intermediates set their sights on the stars when they compete for the Black Kettle Award.

by *Cara Bieroth*

**H**ouston, we have a problem.

These words were spoken during the Auxiliary-sponsored All-American *Certified Angus Beef*® (CAB®) Cook-Off, held at this year's National Junior Angus Show (NJAS) in Louisville, Ky. However, there were no problems for these Indiana intermediates, who swept the contest and beat out teams in other age divisions to walk away with the premier award, the Black Kettle Award.

The Black Kettle Award, created in honor

of Paul St. Blanc, was established in 2000 to recognize the Cook-Off team that ranked highest in recipe, showmanship and overall presentation. Junior, intermediate and senior teams who compete in fresh meat, Quick-N-Easy™ and deli meat divisions are eligible for this top honor.

For Indiana's intermediate team, which includes Ashlyn Carter, Upland; Joe Claeys, Chalmers; Jill Cunningham, Sheridan; Jenna Langley, Walton; Adam Leeper, Argos; and Katelyn Wilson, Orleans, this has been no small feat. The Cook-Off has become something these juniors, as well as the state of Indiana, take very seriously.

## Building the shuttle

Preparations for the Cook-Off occur all year long. Team members begin kicking around ideas for next year's theme and skit right after the competition ends, Tracey Leeper, Adam's mother, says. She has been a key player in helping the Indiana team throughout their Cook-Off career.

"Somebody has to be the one who doles out responsibility and brings things together," Tracey says, "because we have very few times throughout the year where we are all in the same place at the same time."

Once the theme is chosen, everyone connected to the team searches for props and table decorations, such as star-covered tablecloths or lunar landing module salt and pepper shakers, which will be collected gradually throughout the year. Tracey also gets an early start on the skeleton of the script.

Your mother always said doing your homework would pay off. These individuals make sure their homework is done before the script is written.

"You try to get the language of whatever you are doing," Tracey says.

One year the team chose a NASCAR theme. To prepare, they all watched NASCAR races, writing down phrases and language that were used.

This year has been no exception. In the true spirit of the NASA-themed skit, members watched "Apollo 13," which Tracey says really helped with the language for the skit. That was only the beginning. Through a family close to them, they were able to call upon an actual astronaut to help perfect the script.

Fax machines and telephones were essential as ideas were bounced back and forth between members and their families before the i's could be dotted and the t's could be crossed.

## The count down

These members are old pros when it comes to performing in the Cook-Off. Jenna, Ashlyn, Joe and Adam have been competing together in the Cook-Off since 2000. This experience may have contributed to the



► Mission control tries to make sense of the message they are receiving from the shuttle.

► A crew member frantically searches for *Certified Angus Beef*®, only to find packets of dehydrated chicken and Tang.



team's success. Kathy Wilson, Katelyn's mother, says that over time, they have learned some of the things that appeal to judges when it comes to performing a skit, which helps out tremendously. The addition of Jill and Katelyn has only added to the team's capabilities.

Another vital thing they have learned is the importance of scripting parts to fit the personalities of the team members.

"You've got to learn the personalities and the strong points of the kids," Tracey says. A team member who is outgoing or who has a gift for acting out a part can be given a lead role. Team members who are shy or get stage fright can be given roles where they would be more apt to succeed.

In the end it won't matter if you win an Oscar for your performance if you don't have a recipe that will command the same applause. Luckily for these performers, in addition to their acting prowess, they had a dish that was out of this world. Called "Out of this World Stuffed Tenderloin," it sent their scores soaring. Joe's father, Matt Claeys, played a major role in developing the recipe, which Adam says they discovered at a cattle show. He continued to modify the technique until the team decided the beef was just right.

The mileage between these Indiana juniors made it exceptionally difficult to memorize lines and learn the skit.

"We are at the north end of the state, 45 miles from the Michigan state line," Tracey says. "The Wilsons are 10 miles from the Kentucky state line, so we are at opposite ends of the state, and the other kids fall somewhere in between."

Time and distance, along with numerous extracurricular activities and commitments, make it difficult to get everyone together to practice. Their main practice is at the state preview show in December. Here, finalized scripts are distributed and parts are assigned before they meet again at the NJAS.

"We all are guilty of not learning our lines," Ashlyn says. "It's hard to do when you are by yourself, and it's boring to sit and read your lines over and over. So we do most of our preparing when we get to nationals."

Learning the skit as a group has been their biggest challenge, she adds. "Nobody really gets into learning the lines until the day before, when we are all getting nervous and we figure we need to learn our lines real quick. It is just hard to get motivated about it until it is right there and you know you have to do it, but once we get motivated, we get really into it."

At a pizza party by the pool, the members begin rehearsing the production together, practicing lines and places, and making sure the costumes and the props are in order. "The day of the Cook-Off, we practice again

all morning. Then we go and we do it," Ashlyn says.

For Adam, performing the skit is the best part. "You get all nervous and excited at the same time," he says, "and that is pretty cool."

### Liftoff

"It is a really neat experience to see it all come together and have them do it really well," Tracey says. "Those kids are changing things right down to the wire. As they are ready to go in, after we have run through it several times, they are still adding things that they think will make it even better. When they are practicing, someone will get funny and make up a corny line or a quick come back, and we just go with it. It is just part of the way they work. But when they get in that quiet room with no distractions, nerves kick in for all of them, and they make it come off without a hitch."

"We just want to do well in our division and just go out and do the best we can," Katelyn says.

Indiana has become known as a force to be reckoned with when it comes to the Cook-Off. "Indiana is always expected to do well," Ashlyn says. "And not just by our state. I have been told by members of several other states that Indiana is expected to be competitive."

It's not surprising that Indiana has a reputation for excellence. Since the Black Kettle Award was founded four years ago, every junior in three Indiana families has won this honor. In 1999, the year prior to the establishment of the Black Kettle Award, the senior Indiana team received perfect scores in showmanship, recipe and overall presentation.

Katelyn's sisters, Kristi and Kara, received the award before she did. "They won the Black Kettle when they were in high school, and I am just a fifth grader," she says. "Now we all have one, and we all know what it feels like, and that is really cool."

In fact, the intermediate team beat the senior team in which many of their siblings competed. "We were kind of shocked because the senior team had always been the one that had done well," Kristi says. "We were really excited for them because they worked really hard for it. They were so shocked and

excited when they won. We were sitting right beside them. To be able to watch their reactions was really fun."

### To the moon and back

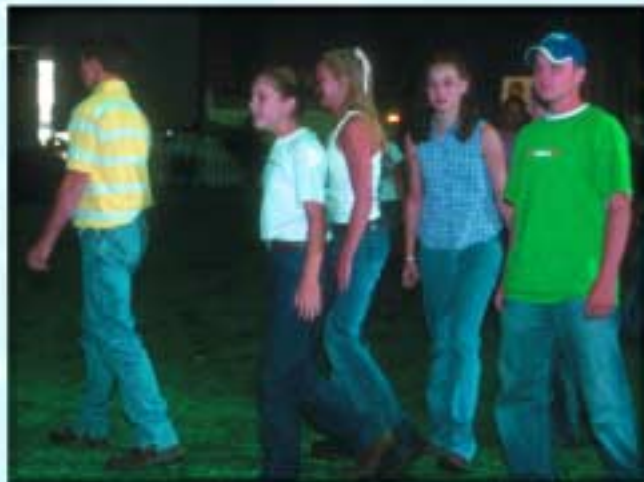
The NJAS Cook-Off is something that everyone in Indiana gets excited about. "It is something that they have a passion for," Kathy says. "Excitement breeds excitement, and success breeds success."

When the 1999 senior Cook-Off team received perfect scores, state members took an interest in participating. The following year, three teams from Indiana participated in the contest. "Those younger kids have grown up with it," Kathy says. "They have seen the success of the senior team and have been striving to reach that same pinnacle."

These juniors have certainly reached that pinnacle, proving to everyone that they have what it takes to make it to the moon and back.



**Editor's Note:** For a copy of the winning recipe and others entered in the Cook-Off, visit the Angus Productions Inc. (API) real-time coverage of the 2003 NJAS at [www.angusjournal.com/njas/](http://www.angusjournal.com/njas/) or request a hard copy from Stephanie Veldman, assistant editor, at [sveldman@angusjournal.com](mailto:sveldman@angusjournal.com).



► Indiana intermediates gladly accept their Black Kettle Award.