

The Sweetest

Family bonds and a die-hard work ethic gave this showman the memory of his life.

Story & photos by **Alaina Burt**

Blake Bloomberg had to shake off more than the usual precompetition jitters at the National Junior Angus Showmanship Contest July 16-17 in Kansas City, Mo. Ten years ago, Bloomberg broke his leg while showing cattle in the same facility during the American Royal. "After I broke my leg I was a little scared, but I realized you just have to jump back in," says Bloomberg, who has been showing cattle since he could walk.

At this year's National Junior Angus Show

(NJAS) he walked into the same ring and laid those old memories to rest. The brightness of the National Junior Angus Showmanship Contest outshone any residual thoughts of broken bones when Bloomberg won top showman honors.

Family ties

When Blake's name was announced as the top showman, his mother, Mary, could hardly believe it. Showing cattle has been his passion in life, she says. "It's what he lives for."

Showing cattle has been a family project from the beginning, says Blake, who adds that he can't attribute his success in the ring to any one person. The whole family has shown him the ropes.

"The best thing about showing cattle is that it's a family event; you can all come and enjoy yourself, even win — or not," Blake says.

Indeed, there was no one at home in Berwick, Ill. (where the Bloombergs raise Angus and Simmental cattle), to call to tell the exciting news. Blake's mother; grandmother, Dede

Ray; aunt, Amy Brooks; and sister, Jamie, were in Kansas City to support him. His father, Jim, and younger brother, Jake, were on the road to another cattle show.

"My mom never misses a show," Mary says about Dede, adding that Blake's grandmother is the force behind the entire family.

Blake started showing with the help of his aunt. His first three years were Amy's last three years of showing. Blake recalls some of the battles they had. "That's OK," he says, "because it taught me a lot about what a family is and what it means to show cattle and how special it really is."

Now, Blake is in Amy's shoes, helping his younger brother and sister show cattle, often giving up the better animals for them to show. He'll be the first to say he's critical of what they do, but he isn't too hard on them.

"I don't think there's any reason to chew on them," Blake says. "I don't want to burn them out, because nobody ever burnt me out; that's why I love it so much."

He says the showmanship technique runs in the family. Both Jamie and Jake have done well in showmanship contests.

"They do a good job showing, and they should be commended for putting up with me," Blake says.

Showing and judging

Each of the three showmanship judges commented on their experiences in showmanship contests and how it felt to be on the other side of the microphone. Blake, who attends Black Hawk East in Kewanee, Ill., and is a member of the judging team, says he can relate to the judges' comments. He's already both competed in and judged showmanship contests.

Mary says Blake does a good job judging because he tries to make everyone feel special, even if their heifers aren't at the top of the class. To Blake, it's easy to pick heifers apart, but by saying a few good things it helps young people learn.

"Winning is fun, but winning is not everything because they're learning life skills that are going to last them the rest of their lives in the showing, and that's what's important," he says, adding that it's important to remember, as a judge, young people have feelings and that all cattle have quality.

That mentality recognizes the efforts juniors put into their show animals before they even get to the show.

Working hard each day

At home, Blake is up at 6:30 a.m. to feed and rinse heifers.



PHOTO BY CORINNE PATTERSON

► **Above:** Chelsea Frost, Tallula, and Blake Bloomberg, Berwick, represented Illinois at this year's showmanship contest. Blake says, "If she would have won, I would have been just as happy for her as she was for me." Chelsea placed second in the contest.

► **Right:** The women in Blake's family were there to support him at the NJAS, while his dad and younger brother were on the road to another cattle show. Pictured are (from left) Dede Ray, grandmother; Amy Brooks, aunt; Blake; Jamie Bloomberg, sister; and Mary Bloomberg, mother.



"The cattle actually live better than I do because they never miss a meal," he jests. "Sometimes I miss a meal getting them theirs."

It's important for youth to work with their animals at home, Blake says. He's seen too many parents do all the work, which makes it difficult for animals to get to know the young people and vice versa.

One of his own show heifers, Sweet Cheeks, has a special bond with Blake and will always have a place in his pasture.

Dan Hoge, animal science professor at Black Hawk East and livestock judging coach, has seen Blake's commitment to his family's farm.

"He's the oldest of the family, and they look to him for a lot of leadership," Hoge says, recalling nights when Blake would practice with the judging team and leave for home only to be back at school the next day. Hoge has seen Blake grow and mature through his freshman year at college, where he became a team leader.

In regard to the National Junior Angus Showmanship Contest, "His goal was really to represent Illinois," Hoge says, adding that winning top honors was special because Blake wasn't expecting it.

Being lucky and successful are sometimes synonymous, Hoge says, quoting Texas football coach Darrell Royal, who said, "Luck is what happens when preparation meets opportunity."

Adds Hoge, "I'd say he prepared a lifetime for this, and he had a chance to do it."

Matt Claeys, livestock judging coach and beef Extension specialist at Purdue University, first got to know Blake when he was 9 or 10 years old, and was able to visit with him the night before the showmanship competition. He says that Blake wasn't very confident, and he was a little bit worried. "He doesn't necessarily always realize his abilities," Claeys says, adding that Blake is a perfectionist. "He's one who strives for perfection in a lot of things that he does, primarily in the livestock arena."

During the years, Claeys has seen Blake mature. "He's also gained confidence in what he sees and isn't afraid to be responsible and express his opinion, but he does so in a very appropriate manner," Claeys says.

Jerry Cassady, regional manager for Illinois, Indiana, Michigan and Wisconsin, adds, "I put him in a class of his own when it comes to animal husbandry. In his own age group, he would have few peers."

Tips from the pro

Blake has many positive thoughts on showing cattle. When he was younger, he learned by watching others, but he says he's always had a feel for the ring. He has found



► **Left:** Jerry Cassady, regional manager, congratulates Blake after being named top showman. "He's a hard-working kid — he could show a turtle," Cassady says.

► **Below:** Emily Pohlman (left), Norfolk, Neb.; Blake; and Jennifer Ourso, Donaldsonville, La., await being called into the ring for the naming of the top showman.



success elsewhere with showmanship, but says the National Junior Angus Showmanship Contest is one-of-a-kind. "You have one chance, one time in your life, and that's it."

In regards to showing, Blake says, "You have to realize it's not about you; it's about the animal." He enjoys having a good heifer and exhibiting the animal to her best. Because family and friends spend so much time getting animals and young people to shows, it's only right to try to exhibit the animal to the best of its ability in the ring, Blake says.

A good showman starts by working hard at home and practicing. Young people just need to give it time, Blake advises. "You're not going to be great as soon as you start." Getting young people involved in showing cattle is one of the best things people can do to give young people a sense of responsibility, he adds.

Judges' opinions

Robert Alden, Hamilton, Mo., says Blake set himself apart from other contestants during the two days of competition in the National Junior Angus Showmanship Contest July 16-17 in Kansas City, Mo. "When he came into the ring you could tell that he was there for business," Alden says, commenting that Blake was very professional.

"He didn't look like he was going out to win a showmanship contest," Alan Miller, Le Roy, Ill., says. "He looked like he was going off to work his heifer like he did every day at home in the yard."

Both judges agree that throughout the competition Blake looked cool, calm and collected.

During the competition, one of the first things Blake did was a quick analysis of his heifer to see her strengths and weaknesses. Blake says showmanship isn't just about grabbing a stick and putting it on a heifer. "You have to know what's good, what's wrong with her, and try to show it out of her," he says.

Showmanship judges concur that working with animals at home helps prepare individuals competing in showmanship. "It's purely how much effort and how much practice you want to put into it," says showmanship judge Alan Miller, Le Roy, Ill.

Big dreams, sweet rewards

This year, Blake will be a sophomore. After graduating from a four-year program, he says, he would like to pursue a master's degree and then a doctorate. He's enjoyed judging livestock and would like to become a professor or a judging team coach. One day, he hopes to be asked to judge the NJAS.

These dreams are entirely possible for Blake, Hoge says. "If he continues at this pace and direction, he has the ability and background to judge shows at a national level."

Blake was excited just to make the top 15. "When you think about all the kids that probably tried out," he says, "it's awesome."

His crowning victory will be a treat he can always remember. "They're all sweet, but the Angus showmanship, that's the sweetest."