

Better Beef, Better Exhibitors



Gearing up for its 60th anniversary, the Clarksville Area Better Beef Show molds and educates its young exhibitors.

Story & photos by *Becky Mills*

When the Clarksville Area Better Beef Show started in 1950 it had worthy goals. “The purpose was to give young people in 4-H and FFA a place to show their animals. They develop leadership and citizenship, and it helps pay their way to college,” says John Bartee, Extension director for Montgomery County, Tenn.

Thankfully, that part hasn’t changed. “That’s still what it’s for,” he says. Poll exhibitors and former exhibitors and they’ll agree with Bartee. They’ll tell you to a person the main lesson learned is responsibility — a key ingredient in both leadership and citizenship.

“That’s the biggest thing,” says Lake Elliott, Adams, Tenn. Elliott showed in the steer show for nine years, starting in the fourth grade and ending when he was a senior in high school.

► **Above:** Tyler Davis uses the skills he learned showing steers to help his grandfather Herkie Davis on his cattle operation.

► **Right:** Montgomery County, Tenn., Extension agent John Bartee says exhibitors learn citizenship and leadership showing steers in the Clarksville Area Better Beef Show.

“Responsibility,” echoes 14-year-old Tyler Davis. “Not everybody is going to be there to help me every time I need help.”

Tyler’s grandfather, Herkie Davis, proudly says, “At the December weigh in, Tyler was the only one who already has his steers halter-broken and could lead them in the barn to be weighed.” The show itself isn’t until May.



“Everything that was done to his cattle he did himself,” Bartee adds.

Katie Joiner, 14, also says, “Responsibility. You really have to work with them, or they’ll be wild.”

The lessons extend to the technical. “The steer show is a really neat deal because of all it encompasses,” Elliott says. “It is one of a kind. The kids learn how to do all kinds of things, like figure rate of gain, as well as selection, nutrition and preparation for shows and sales.”

The now 30-year-old put the skills to work. While at the University of Tennessee he interned with Champion Hill in Ohio. After graduation he worked at Toebben’s Triple T in Kentucky as show and sale manager. Since 2005 he has been a partner in his family’s operation, Robert Elliott & Sons.

Davis, who already has a herd of six, puts his cattle skills to work daily, too, both with his own cattle and his grandfather’s Angus-Simmental herd. Still, the steer show gives him even more ways to get hands-on experience.

First is selection. “I want a docile calf, deep, big-boned with a straight back. I want one that sets up good, sets up even, and [is]

fast-growing. I look at his mama and his daddy.”

Angus breeding is deep in his small herd. “They have more marbling and good dispositions,” he explains. “The Angus breed has done so much research on expected progeny differences (EPDs) and carcass traits, and they are easy to finish.”

He learned those lessons well. His two steers were first and second in their classes and won the “Farm Bred and Fed” category.

“I learned more about the cattle business, especially marketing,” the young cattleman continues. “Don’t just take what you can get, but check around. And I learned what you do and don’t want in a carcass.”

His extra attention to marketing and carcass quality paid. One of his steers went to well-known Nashville restaurant Union Station. “We went and ate some of it. It was good,” Davis says.

The carcass contest

The carcass contest is one of the major learning opportunities with the Clarksville show. It started out as part of the original show, but in the 1970s the local packer closed.

“It would have been easy to quit, but we got interested in getting carcass data,” Bartee says.

In 1990 Bartee resurrected the contest. Lee Denzer, animal scientist at Black Hawk College in Kewanee, Ill., collects the carcass data at the Tyson plant in Joslin, Ill. Bartee, formerly a meat grader, handles the chore with the custom harvests at the nearby packing plants. Often, the participants accompany them when they grade the carcasses.

The cattle harvested at Tyson sell on the grid and give the participants exposure to that marketing format, too.

The participants also learn about nutrition’s effect on carcass quality. “One year we had a bunch of dark cutters,” says Joe Elliott, Lake’s father

and partner in their Angus operation. “We looked into it and found they were feeding a substandard mineral. We got the steers on a good mineral program, and this year we didn’t have a single dark cutter.”

The carcass contest is also a major part of the competition. A Steer of Merit award, named after Bartee, is given to the steer who does well in the rate of gain contest, in the showing and on the rail.

Along with developing responsible,

Still learning, still serving

Paul Cooper has been involved in the Clarksville Area Better Beef Show since it began more than a half century ago.

When the inaugural Clarksville Area Better Beef Show took place in 1950, 11-year-old Paul Cooper was there, showing both an Angus and a Hereford steer. In 2009, Cooper was still there, watching, helping and cheering on the exhibitors, especially the ones showing the Angus steers bred on his farm.

The Clarksville cattleman says it never gets old. “I am 70 years old and every year I learn something new about showing steers. I like to see the calves as they grow and go on to the carcass show.”

Last year Cooper sold 32 steers to area 4-H members, and 22 of those were for the Clarksville show.

Young people showing his cattle have had their share of success, including his son, who won first and second in his class, and his daughter, who won reserve champion. Lake Elliott won grand champion and Steer of Merit with a Cooper-bred calf in 2003, the first year one calf managed to win both awards. Then Cooper’s granddaughter won grand champion in 2002 and 2004.

Cooper has a special interest in the Steer of Merit award, which is judged by a formula that carries equal weight for the rate-of-gain contest, placings on the hoof, and the carcass contest.

In 2007, the grandson of Cooper’s longtime friend and county agent John Bartee won the Steer of Merit award with one of Cooper’s calves. It was fourth-grader Daniel Nolan’s first time to show. The calf had

a 4-pound (lb.)-plus average daily gain, was third in his class in the ring and, as Cooper says, “His carcass was real good, too.”

The steer was a year and 20 days old at the show, weighed 1,260 lb. and graded Choice. Even more impressive, he was out of a first-calf heifer.

But Cooper has more to show for his career than the ribbons his cattle have won. He came to his farm as a sharecropper 51 years ago and now owns 350 cows and 895 acres.

“If I hadn’t been in 4-H I wouldn’t own this place,” he states.



► County agent John Bartee and cattleman Paul Cooper reminisce while they look at clippings from the original Clarksville Area Better Beef Show in 1950.



► Paul Cooper sponsors the Steer of Merit award at the Clarksville Area Better Beef Show.

knowledgeable contestants, there are the financial rewards of the show. “It has encouraged a lot of young people to go on to college that wouldn’t have otherwise,” Bartee says. “We’re able to do

that because of the sponsors.”

The Clarksville Chamber of Commerce was the original sponsor and is still heavily involved, but the support of individual businesses is overwhelming. “This past year we had over 300 sponsors and \$323,000 donated,” Joe Elliott says. “That’s a pretty big impact for a 4-H project.”

“None of the exhibitors get less than \$550 from sponsors,” Bartee says.

One of the largest sponsors is Mark

Barnett at the nearby Kentucky-Tennessee Livestock Market in Guthrie, Ky. When the old fairground in Clarksville, which was already too small for the show, flooded in 2003, the show didn’t have a home. Barnett offered the use of the facility and his labor. He also sponsors the awards dinner for exhibitors.

“Mark helps us at weigh-in, and at the show he has pens available,” Lake Elliott says. “That makes it a lot easier to get the steers on the road to the plants.”

One of the best parts is the exhibitors get to pocket, or in most cases save, a good portion of the money because most of the steers are either bred-and-owned or bought from neighbors.

“We encourage them to buy locally and not pay more than market price,” Bartee says.

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“When Lee Denzer judged for us this year he said it was the first steer show he’s judged where the grand champion and reserve champion were both bred-and-owned and fed on the farm,” he adds.

Lake Elliott comments, “We’re proud of that because it shows what education has done.”

The exhibitors also learn to show their gratitude. “You go to those businesses and there is a note from a kid with the kid’s picture on it hanging on the bulletin board,” Bartee says.

“It is good for the kids,” Joe Elliott says. “This year all the sponsors got a Christmas card with all the kids pictured on it. You’ve got to thank them.”

Trevor Beard, 21, is one of the grateful ones. A senior at the University of Tennessee–Martin and Bartee’s summer intern, Beard showed in 1997, 1998 and 2006 with both bred-and-owned steers and a couple purchased from neighbors.

“You can make a chunk of money,” says Beard, who uses the funds to finance college. “Whether you win grand champion or last place, you win.” 



► **Above:** Paul Cooper and former steer show exhibitor Trevor Beard look at Cooper’s Angus heifers. Cooper breeds club calves for area exhibitors. Beard helped fund his college education with money he made exhibiting steers at the Clarksville Area Better Beef Show.



► **Left:** Steve Joiner is glad his daughter, Katie, has the chance to exhibit steers in the Clarksville Area Better Beef Show.