



► Bobby, Emily, Pam and Doug Velisek of Gaithersburg, Md., made the National Junior Angus Show their family vacation for the last 10 years.

A Family Affair

Cattle families make a unique vacation out of the NJAS.

Story & photos by **Nicole Lane**, editorial intern



► Being in the NJAS showing for the final time was bittersweet for Emily. This event has been a family tradition, and it is where she has met her closest friends.

When school lets out for the summer, many families use the break to spend time together on a family vacation. Some head to Yellowstone, others to Hawaii, while some camp and others make a beeline to the nearest beach. Family vacation is normally a time to relax, leave the work at home, sleep in and enjoy some quality time together.

Many cattle families do things differently. For some ranch families, time away from the cows isn't something that comes easily. For several, "family vacation" means the National Junior Angus Show (NJAS).

There wasn't a beach, but it was nice and hot in Tulsa. Instead of sleeping in, exhibitors were up early to head to the tie-outs. However, you won't hear Emily Velisek of Gaithersburg, Md., or Dawson Dal Porto of Brentwood, Calif., complaining. To them, NJAS is one of the greatest weeks of the year.

Family tradition

The Velisek family — Emily, Bobby, Pam

and Doug — began coming to the NJAS in 2005. They haven't missed one since. This year marks their 10th and probably final year, as Bobby has aged out and it is Emily's last year of eligibility. However, as the family reflects on all the places they've been able to go with the cattle, they agree there are more memories made at junior nationals than they could have ever fit into a "normal" family vacation.

"I definitely gave them the option several years of skipping junior nationals and taking a real vacation, and they always chose junior nationals," says Pam. "I'm not sure what we are going to do next year now that they are done."

The Veliseks admit they've taken mini-vacations on the way to or from junior nationals or taken day trips during the show to see the different sights each part of the country offered. The family told stories of visiting Pike's Peak in Colorado, the Louisville Slugger Museum in Kentucky and many more.

"My favorite part of this is that I was able to travel," says Bobby. "I've been coast to coast. My friends always talk and say they want to be able to travel across America, and I've been able to do that doing something that I love."

Pam agrees, saying through showing cattle they've been able to see parts of the country they never would have experienced otherwise. She reminisced about the trips she's been able to take with her daughter — to junior nationals and other shows — to exhibit the cattle the entire family works so hard to produce.

The Angus family

The Dal Portos — Dawson, David and Jeanene — drove 30 hours to make it to Tulsa from California. Dawson hasn't been going to NJAS quite as long as the Veliseks, as this was his fifth year at the show, but it has become something he looks forward to each summer.

His favorite thing, Dawson says, is "getting to do it as a family. Other people might go boating on a yacht or fishing, but no, me and my family, we spend it in the barns, at the ranch, always working cattle."

He emphasizes "family" doesn't end with those who share his last name.

"When you come to a cattle show, everyone is your family," Dawson explains.

The Dal Portos love the competitive atmosphere at NJAS. The chance to see how their cattle compare to cattle from the rest of the country is what draws them. After working all year with the animals, they love to reconnect with old friends from around



► The 30-hour drive from California was worth it to David, Dawson and Jeanene Dal Porto. They enjoy the time spent together and with people they call their Angus family.

the nation and find out how their cattle sort comparatively. This year was a huge success, as one of Dawson's heifers took home reserve grand champion owned heifer the last day of the show.

"It's what we do at home as a family, and you can take it on the road with you," Jeanene says.

Like the Veliseks, the Dal Portos have given

Dawson the option to do something different for family vacation, but he always picks the cattle show.

"This is what we love, what we are passionate about," says Jeanene. "We've asked Dawson before what he would rather do, but instead of choosing something else, he makes sacrifices to be here."

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PHOTO BY RANEY LOVORN

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Working hard or hardly working?

Showing cattle is hard work, and some may say these families are crazy for going on vacation to work so hard. The Dal Portos and Veliseks would disagree.

“It’s not really work because I enjoy it,” says Dawson. “If you are doing what you love, then you never work a day in your life, so I don’t really consider it working.”

The Veliseks echo his response. For them it’s a family tradition, something they have been doing together a lot longer than they’ve been coming to NJAS. Pam and Doug met at a cattle show when they were National Junior Angus Association (NJAA) members, so it seems fitting that they share this love of cattle and the experience of NJAS with their children.

“It’s what we do together,” says Doug. “We’ve always been in the cattle business, and this, this is just what we do.”

“Because we love it,” adds his daughter.

A long haul

For David, the fact that so many families travel the miles to NJAS each year makes a statement about the people who raise Angus cattle. With a near record number of entries this year at Tulsa and 34 states represented, the Dal Portos realize they aren’t the only ones who mix work and play while away from the ranch.

“People sacrifice time both personally and financially to be here,” David says. “I think that’s just great for our breed of cattle to have this much youth involvement in this day and age in a program.”



► Emily says families don’t have to bring cattle to come to NJAS, but if they do, they’ll be hooked.

Jeanene agrees.

“It shows the dedication not only from the kids, but from the families,” she says. “I mean, it’s a family effort. It isn’t just mom or dad or the kids, it’s a whole family effort.”

Both families drove numerous days to make it to this year’s NJAS, but each said it was more than worth the long travel hours. It’s part of the fun.

“I drive it with Dawson every year, and there is nothing better than being stuck in the truck with your kid for those days because you are still in touch with them,” Jeanene says.

The road trips are part of the experience but each family says the friendships made

at these events last a lifetime. Pam jokes she might come to Nebraska next year just to visit people.

Join the fun

Emily encourages families to come even if they don’t bring cattle, although she says if they do, they’ll be hooked. As she looks back on her NJAA experience and numerous nationals attended, she says her best friends were made at NJAS, and she has learned so much through participating in all the contests.

“It’s so worth it,” says Emily. “Even if you don’t want to bring your cattle this far, there are so many other things that kids can stay busy with — all the contests and everything. You don’t have to have cattle to come to nationals.”

For both families the work, the long travel and even the heat are nothing compared to the time spent together and with the cattle.

“It’s a long way to go, but the memories you make going, the memories you make there and the memories that you make going home are great,” Jeanene says. “Once you do it, you’ll understand what keeps us coming back year after year.”

The NJAS may seem like an untraditional family vacation, but for these cattle families, it’s one of their favorite times of the year.

“Once you come one time, you’ll want to come back,” says David. “It’s just a great opportunity and family time together with the kids.”



PHOTO BY RANEY LOVORN

► Victory is that much sweeter when family is there to share in the success. Jeanene and Dawson share a celebratory hug after he won reserve grand champion owned heifer.

