

# SHOWMAN BRINGS CROWD TO ITS FEET

11-year-old Alec Gotto lets nothing stand in the way of his love for the showring.

by *Mayzie Purviance*, editorial intern

**A**lec Gotto and his steer, J.D., captured hearts and inspired spectators as they entered the showring at the 2017 National Junior Angus Show (NJAS) in Des Moines, Iowa.

All week long the spectators and judges had watched as hundreds of junior members walked their animals around the ring. The Dyersville, Iowa, native navigated the deep bed of green shavings in a wheelchair, bringing a crowd of inspired onlookers to their feet.

Alec entered Class 7 in the middle of the pack, his steer's halter zip-tied to his chair. Casey Jentz, American Angus Association regional manager, walked alongside. As Alec and J.D. circled the showring, Jentz pushed the shavings in front of them to make a better track for Alec to wheel through.

The line of cattle came to a halt and Alec sat, frozen, locking eyes with the steer standing beside him. J.D. stared back and began to position himself in a careful manner, almost as if the pair were having a telepathic conversation.

The rest of the showmen positioned their animals' feet with showsticks, but not Alec. Alec didn't have to use a showstick; all he had to do was look into J.D.'s eyes.

As the other showmen began to parade around the ring again, Alec broke his silent stare.

"Come on J.D.!" he encouraged, and took off on his chair, J.D. trailing along beside him.

Judge Lacey Robinson examined the cattle in the ring, talking to the exhibitors while studying each animal. Showmen scurried around their cattle, trying to present the best view of their animal to the judge and praying to be pulled to the top of the class. Yet, Alec's focus would not be broken by the hustle and bustle of the environment around him. He concentrated on J.D.

The pair placed fourth in their class. As the showmen led their animals from the ring, Robinson gave reasons for her placings — first, second, third ...

"The young man coming up here next, let's give him a round of applause," she said. The crowd clapped their hands together as Alec and J.D. moved to the middle of the ring on their way out. Robinson began to speak again, but the crowd didn't stop cheering. Instead, they rose to their feet in a standing ovation.

As the judge made her final remarks and Alec and J.D. exited the ring, a feeling of awe lingered. Moments such as these are monumental. They can make you realize



PHOTO BY PEARL'S PICS COURTESY OF AMERICAN ANGUS ASSOCIATION

► Alec Gotto and his steer, J.D., share a strong connection in the ring at the National Junior Angus Show. This picture was posted on the American Angus Association Facebook page and received more than 12,500 shares, reaching all across the globe in places such as Australia and Ireland.



PHOTOS BY MAYZIE PURVIANCE



► Alec's father rigs J.D.'s halter to Alec's chair for morning exercise on the Gotto family farm.

► Cattle are naturally drawn to Alec, his family shares. Some of the Gotto family's herd bond with him in his barn.

what you have, what you don't have and what you take for granted. They can even bring you to your feet.

### Stubborn and strong-willed

Alec was diagnosed with transverse myelitis at just 8 months old after experiencing paralysis at daycare. The disease causes a swelling of the spinal cord, normally brought on by a bacterial or viral infection. Unfortunately, Alec's case remains unexplained.

Paralyzed from the neck down, he can hold his head up, and he is gaining some mobility in his legs. The determined junior member isn't allowing his situation to keep him out of the showring. Leading J.D. through the showring at the 2017 NJAS in Des Moines, Iowa, tops the list of accomplishments.

"The kid is stubborn, to be honest with

you," mom Carrie laughs. "If he wants to do it, he will do it. We just go with it; we treat him like any other kid.

"He's a normal kid," she emphasizes, "just in a wheelchair."

### A love of farming

Like siblings Brenden, Bella, Karlee and Nolan, Alec loves all things farming. He helps in every way he can with daily chores at the Gotto family farm, which is home to 225 head of Angus cows and an assortment of barn kittens.

Affectionately called "Boss Man" by his family, Alec oversees day-to-day tasks and will catch any recordkeeping mistakes that could possibly be made.

Ask any of the four siblings about their favorite thing to do, and "farming" will be the enthusiastic answer. The family spends its free time washing 4-H cattle and roaming from

pasture to pasture on their Polaris Ranger to check cows.

"We're very fortunate to have the kids next to us," says Alec's father, Chad. "I try to involve them, especially the boys, as much as I can from day to day. The boys are very good help," he says, emphasizing that Alec is included in that description. He pauses, laughs and then shakes his head: "If you let him, he'll bring cows up to you."

### Connection with cattle

Alec has been showing for two years and has won a handful of ribbons and titles. Following the NJAS, Alec was awarded showmanship honors at the fair in Wyoming, Iowa. He also cleaned house at his county fair, winning reserve champion rate of gain with J.D. (which stands for John Deere) and blue ribbons with his heifer, Ice Cream, and his cow-calf pair, Ace and Spade.

"He's a nice steer," brother Brenden says of J.D. "He's just really nice, but so are the rest of [Alec's] animals."

Alec has quite the connection with most animals he comes across — especially cattle, his family shares. He instantly bonds with cattle that haven't been trained to a halter or to lead, those that spend their days out in the pasture. The same group of cows that would be spooked if approached by his siblings will nudge Alec to pet their heads. It's incredible how much of an impact he and his herd have on one another.

"Whenever Chad and I will try to take one of them and lead it, they'll be bucky," says Carrie. "But when Alec gets right up next to it, it's as calm as can be. They just have this special connection."

J.D. wore a show halter for the first time



PHOTO BY PEARL'S PICS COURTESY OF AMERICAN ANGUS ASSOCIATION

► American Angus Association Regional Manager Casey Jentz helps Alec and J.D. parade around the ring at the 2017 NJAS in Des Moines, Iowa.

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the day before check-in at the NJAS. Alec entered the ring with J.D. for the first time at this year's NJAS. Chad said the family didn't put any more work toward J.D. than they did any of their other show cattle.

"It's just something that happens," Chad says. "They just trust each other."

### Wheeling into the ring

Watching Alec in the showring at NJAS was indescribable, Carrie says.

"It's hard to explain the feeling," she offers. "I was bawling, crying my eyes out — it's just exciting. I always get goose bumps when he enters the ring."

It was an emotional moment for everyone witnessing J.D.'s NJAS showring debut. Judge Lacey Robinson recognized in her remarks that Alec had the "biggest calf out there and the biggest heart to go with it."

This brought the crowd to its feet in a standing ovation.

Jentz says although those outside of the ring likely couldn't see or hear it, when J.D. would pull on Alec's chair or stop in his tracks, the two would lock eyes and Alec would say, "Come on J.D.! Come on J.D.!" and J.D. would follow his orders.

"It was honestly the highlight of my week," Jentz continues. "I've never had to do anything like that before, and it was really cool. You can really see him connect with the calf."

Alec says he doesn't worry about J.D. when they're in the showring because they trust each other. Grinning ear to ear, he adds, "It's easy."



PHOTO BY MAYZIE PURVIANCE

► Alec flashes a smile from the passenger seat of his family's Polaris Ranger while overseeing palpation.

"As far as the actual moment, it's nervous; overwhelming," Chad says of watching his son in the showring. He shrugs and lets out a chuckle. "For me, well, for me it's a blur. You're just caught up in the moment, and it's just one of those things where it happens and it's a great experience. It's something I wouldn't trade for anything."

Alec doesn't let anything stand in his way of doing what he loves, Chad says, not even a wheelchair.

That's what's so significant about him. He sees himself as just a normal farm boy, waking up every morning to walk his cattle and feeding them every night. To anyone who catches a glimpse of his grin and hears his heart-warming laugh, he's so much more.

With his can-do attitude and obvious connection to his steer, he brought a barn full of onlookers to their feet in admiration.

