

NATIONAL

Distinctly Denver

A National Western favorite, the Angus carload and pen show attracts top genetics.

Story & photos by **Jena McReil**, digital editor

Mornings start early in Denver. Hours before the sun begins to rise, teams of fitters are hustling to prepare for a long day at the National Western Stock Show (NWSS).

Cattle must be fed, rinsed, clipped and fitted before they begin one of the most anticipated days of the year. Careful genetic selections, months of care on the ranch, and weeks spent working with the cattle all culminate during a trip into the show arena.

The carload and pen show at the NWSS is a competition that is distinctly Denver. The only one of its type in the country, exhibitors showcase the quality and uniformity in a group of animals, 10 and three, respectively.

Glenn Johnson of Chestnut Angus Farm, Pipestone, Minn., has been entering registered-Angus bulls in the carload-and-pen show for just shy of 10 years. He and his

son, Wesley, were up with their team at 3 a.m. on Saturday, Jan. 17, to get their 13 bulls showing ready.

Chestnut Angus Farm entered a carload and a pen during this year's event.

"In the morning, I am thinking about making sure all the cattle ate well, that everyone is doing a nice job getting them ready and checking over fine little details as we are working on the bulls," Johnson says. "It's important that they look the best they possibly can when you get them in the ring."

Strings of lights overlook rows of cattle in the Chestnut Angus stall down in the historic Denver stockyards, giving light while the team focuses in on all the key details — feet, legs, top line — to make sure the animals look their best. It's a cold start to the day, and the sun finally begins to peak over the

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► Glenn (left) and son Wesley Johnson of Chestnut Angus Farm have been entering bulls in the carload-and-pen show for almost 10 years.



► Fitting cattle requires intense focus and attention to detail. During the carload-and-pen show, that's amplified through the entire group of bulls. Bailey McKay applies some of the finishing touches.

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horizon as the carload of 10 makes its way down the aisle and to the scales.

The bulls are weighed so judges can consider the average weight for the group, along with expected progeny differences (EPDs) and other performance data. After the cattle are weighed, they are led to the entrance of the NWSS Livestock Center Auction Arena, where exhibitors anxiously wait for their turn in the ring.

It's almost show time.

A step back in history

Today the National Western Complex is bustling with activity, livestock exhibitors moving in and out, and families and tourists coming in to see what the show has to offer.

At the turn of the 20th century, the region would have been lively for a different set of reasons. Historian Dan Green says the historic Livestock Exchange Building, which now sets adjacent to the arena where the carload-and-pen competition takes place, was the heart and soul of the Denver stockyards. The building is located a stone's throw away from the railroad, and trains coming down from the mountains would bring cattle from the Western rangeland.

Merchandisers eagerly awaited the next load.

The region's ability to attract substantial groups of cattle and interested buyers resulted in a strong interest in Denver and the NWSS, Green says. Range conditions in the West demanded large amounts of bulls

that could produce consistent offspring, and the NWSS pen and carload competitions became the leading way for ranchers to present their animals to meet that goal.

"One of the really distinctive features of the National Western Stock Show has always been the pen-and-carload show, and it's really the only show in America that has anything like it," Green says.

For one, the Denver stockyards had the facilities necessary to conduct a show of this magnitude. Also, the market was there for potential customers from across the country to see what each exhibitor had to offer.

Green adds that the pen-and-carload competition was always a sight to see: "In the old days, there would be massive numbers of loads filling the stockyards. They would begin every National Western rodeo by having a marching-in of the champion carloads. Ten bulls, shoulder to shoulder, would form a line, and they would come with load after load for about 15 to 20 minutes."

Competing for consistency

Back in the auction arena, Glenn and Wesley Johnson are ready to bring in their cattle. They wait alongside the entrance before they are announced to lead their first bull into the ring. The cattle enter, one at a time, as their performance data is displayed on a screen overhead. The judges, and those watching in the crowd, follow along and analyze each entry's birth weight, weaning weight, yearling weight and milk expected



progeny differences (EPDs), as well as other important measures.

The carload and pen show always attracts a crowd, and nearly every row of seats is occupied. A nod to the competition's impressive history, photographs of carload and pen champions dating back to 1906 are affixed to walls that arc the building. Walking along the images, you can trace the history and trends that have built the U.S. cattle industry.

Glenn whistles lightly to encourage the animals to move along.

"Sometimes the bulls act like they should, and sometimes they don't act like they should," he says. "There's really a lot of adrenaline going when all the bulls come back out together. It's always nice to see how even and balanced they look in the ring together."

Once the judges have the chance to evaluate each individual animal, they bring the entire carload or pen back in the showing. A panel of three judges is charged with ranking the entries. This year's judges were Arlen Sawyer, Bassett, Neb.; Chad Ellingson, Saint Anthony, N.D.; and Phil Trowbridge, Ghent, N.Y.

"For me, it's like going to Heaven. Getting the opportunity to judge those cattle, one after the other, there's nothing I'd rather do," Trowbridge says. "We are at a time right now where Angus cattle are probably the best they've ever been. We've got data to back them up. Everyone studies structure now extremely hard, and I think it's a complete package."

Structural correctness is the first thing to look for, Trowbridge notes, and he pays close attention to the animal's feet and legs, how they travel, and then body type. Volume, capacity, fleshing ability and uniformity throughout the group are all important characteristics, he says.



► A dedicated crew works to get each bull ready for the showing.

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Analyzing a group of 10 head isn't an easy task, and each judge takes meticulous notes to remember the traits associated with each entry. After the evaluation is complete, the carload is led back out and lined up outside the building to wait for the results.

"This is a history-making show. It always has been, and that's why it is so exciting for me," Trowbridge says. "I've been coming here for 40-plus years, and every year it's a high spot for me to be able to go watch the pens and carloads, and see how everyone has progressed."

To the side of the arena, each entry stands together until class winners are announced. The groups of cattle congregate underneath an arched sign that says, "In the Yards," and the true beauty of a carload or pen shines through when you see the bulls lined up together. One precise detail after another — from the perfectly groomed feet and legs, up to the carefully defined top line, each individual animal adds to the quality of the group.

Their ears nearly move in tandem with each passing noise; and their breath creates a heavy fog in the still early morning chill.

Time well-spent

The carload-and-pen competition is an intense day of showing for Chestnut Angus Farm and the event's other exhibitors, and that 24 hours is relatively small compared to the countless hours and days spent preparing back home — studying the pedigrees,



►Each of the 13 bulls Chestnut Angus Farms brought has had months of meticulous preparation.



►Once the judges have the chance to evaluate each individual animal, they bring the entire carload or pen back into the showing.

selecting the genetics and hoping for the best come calving season.

"We start picking them when they're born," Johnson says. "We can always tell when the calves are born what's going to be good, and you watch them grow through the summer. Usually by May-time we have a pretty good idea which bulls are going to be in the carload and the pen."

Chestnut Angus is a family operation that markets about 75 registered-Angus bulls each year. Their southwest Minnesota farm is home to about 225 Angus cows and a bit of cropland.

Johnson says he enjoys coming to the NWSS because of the exposure his cattle receive and the interest shown from buyers nationwide. They typically sell a head or two while in Denver, and they also drum up attention for their annual production sale. It's more than 700 miles from home, but Johnson believes it is well

worth the time and travel to promote their operation on a national stage.

"We're enjoying the opportunity to showcase our cattle here at the National Western and to see how we compare to other ranchers and breeders from throughout the country," Johnson says. "People travel from all over to come here and see what other breeders are doing. It's the best place to showcase your cattle."

Chestnut Angus Farm had much to be proud of following this year's event. Their carload placed fourth overall, and they exhibited the reserve champion pen of three. The team was all smiles as they gathered in front of the photo backdrop, beaming with pride from a job well-done.

Mornings start early in Denver. The days are long, and the nights are short. Most exhibitors are at the show for about 10 days, and yet, for those who make a living raising purebred cattle, there seems no place they'd rather be.

"I used to get really nervous before we brought in the cattle," Johnson says, "but we have been here long enough, now we just let it flow. When the judges are done with their scores, we're always relieved to see where we stood."

"It's a big relief off us, because this is what we work for all year: to come here to display our bulls and show them off," he continues. "It's always a big relief when we're done."

