

‘Ah, the showing — where I can lose old friends and make new enemies.’

This quote by legendary livestock judge Miles McKee, professor emeritus of Kansas State University (K-State) describes a familiar sentiment for those who have exhibited or evaluated cattle at a livestock show.

From the smallest county fair to the biggest international livestock exposition, individuals who serve as judges may enjoy the prestige and notoriety; however, they also endure their fair share of headaches. The role of the successful livestock judge is one that requires integrity, discipline, knowledge of the industry, and the utmost in professionalism and ethics.

Since the beginning of competitive livestock events, judging has served many functions, primarily in evaluating, influencing and setting the direction of cattle type through visual evaluation.

“Livestock shows began as a means of bringing people and livestock together to observe, compare and evaluate differences between animals,” says David Hawkins of Michigan State University (MSU), explaining the tradition began several centuries ago. “The ultimate goal for the livestock judge was to rank the animals from most desirable to least desirable for their intended use.”

Official judges for these competitive events were selected by their peers to serve as the official opinion of that show, usually with awards such as ribbons, prizes and recognition given to the winners. Since these early shows in the 1800s, thousands of individuals have accepted the responsibility of serving as the “official judge.”

Jack Ward, Kansas City, Mo., has served as a professional judge for national shows for more than 20 years. He says it is important for judges to realize the important role they provide to the industry.

“In addition to helping set trends and types, the importance of judging is to provide dialogue between breeders on where the industry is headed,” Ward says.

Many professional judges also enjoy evaluating junior shows for the opportunity to inspire and motivate young people in the livestock business, says Jim Williams, Boling, Texas, who has judged more than 30 state fairs and many national-level shows during the past 30 years.

“When judging junior shows, you are not only responsible for selecting the best cattle, but you also have the opportunity to improve and uplift youngsters,” Williams says.

Individuals who serve as a judge should do so with a tremendous amount of responsibility, says Ken Geuns, extension specialist at MSU and seasoned livestock judge.

“Judging animal shows is an honor,” says



Judging With Professionalism

Industry experts offer advice for filling the role of a professional judge.

by Rachel Cutrer & Joelynn Donough

Geuns, who has evaluated cattle in 35 states. “Judges have the opportunity to teach, help develop young people, showcase animal agriculture, and even provide a social and entertaining event to those in the crowd.”

Judging also provides opportunity to meet new people, travel, see good livestock, and be compensated for your time and knowledge.

How do you become a judge?

According to Hawkins, most judges have worked for years within the industry to establish their reputation as livestock men and women, educators, managers and marketers. There are also opportunities for young people to develop their livestock

evaluation skills through 4-H, FFA and collegiate livestock judging programs.

Word-of-mouth referrals are also a big factor in securing show-judging jobs, says Ward, who recommends participating in industry activities to make contacts. “As a first step, participate in as many activities as possible. This might include breed association activities, exhibiting your own cattle at shows, or participating in collegiate livestock judging contests. This is how you first get noticed.”

New judges can emerge from industry contacts, such as volunteering in agricultural activities, working as a fitter or showman, or working in a livestock-related career. With



this in mind, Ward reminds those who are interested in becoming a judge to always be professional, because “you never know who is watching.”

As a beginning judge, one must be willing to travel, and realize that even the best and most well-known judges start somewhere.

“Do not be afraid to travel to whatever-size show you will be asked to judge,” Ward says. “The first state fair I judged was the result of traveling two states away to judge a small county fair,” he reflects. “The superintendent of the state fair happened to be from that small county fair and liked how I handled myself. Two years later I got asked to judge their state fair.”

True professional judges should avoid ‘campaigning’ for judging jobs, Geuns says. “Do a good job, and the jobs will come.”

Before the show

Serving as a professional livestock judge requires organization to effectively do your job. First, a judge should maintain an updated personal calendar in order to accurately determine whether or not he or she can accept judging assignments without scheduling conflicts.

Randy Daniel, Colbert, Ga., has been judging cattle shows nationwide for more

than 20 years. When a show calls him, he immediately asks the basics: What show? When? Where? Who is the main contact?

Typically, a judge does not have to worry about having expenses, he says. “On average, a judge will make \$250 to \$300 per day, plus have all expenses paid, including travel to and from the airport, parking fees, hotel rooms, etc. A judge should always be able to walk away from a show with more money than he or she came with.”

Before accepting a show assignment, ask yourself if you are willing to accept the responsibilities. Are you expected to judge females, bulls, steers, showmanship or all of the above? Is this a junior or an open show? Asking these questions up front will help you determine the level of responsibility you are about to undertake.

Then make an honest assessment of your skill level. Are you qualified for this show based on its size and level of competition? Are you physically able to judge the show based on the number of head expected and the time constraints? Finally, do you have any personal issues that may present a conflict of interest, such as ownership of cattle or close friendships with exhibitors?

Once you agree to judge a show, immediately write down the show date and location in your personal calendar to avoid any scheduling conflicts. Keep a record of all correspondence with the show officials. Obtain a phone number and email for your primary show contact, and write down a physical address of the show so that you are able to easily find the location on the day of the event.

“Larger shows will book you six months to a year prior to the event. This gives you plenty of time to plan. Smaller shows can call anywhere between four to six months prior. With the bigger shows, you will want to clear your calendar, have travel ready with back-up plans. But smaller shows are sometimes more local, so there isn’t as much planning,” says Daniel.

A judge should also ask the show officials if they publicize the show judge’s name prior to the event, or if the judge is to be kept confidential. Do not advertise to your friends and fellow peers that you have been hired to judge the specific show. Once you are hired, it’s a good idea to avoid discussing your opinion of certain cattle or attending similar show events immediately prior to judging your event.

During the show

When the day of the show arrives, the judge should arrive at the showring and check in with the staff approximately 30 minutes to 1 hour prior to the event, says Chris Mullinix, coach of the Butler

Community College livestock judging team and familiar judge of livestock shows nationwide.

“When you first arrive at the show, check in with the show management,” Mullinix says. “This is the time where you and the show officials will set your plan for the day.”

Before the show starts, a judge should instruct ring stewards on how he or she would like the classes to be lined up and worked. Describe where you would like the animals to enter the ring, how you want the animals to be displayed for front, rear and side views, and if you will be placing from the top down or bottom up. These instructions will help the show move efficiently.

Judges should also be familiar with any special details of the show. For example, will the show be providing weights or performance information to be considered in the evaluation of cattle? Will you be sharing the main arena (and microphone) with another judging event, or is your show the only one going on at that time?

Some shows, such as local or district shows, may utilize the ribbon system (blue, red, white) to allow for advancement of a certain percentage of exhibitors to the next level of competition, and judges should be aware of this procedure prior to judging. Other judging events, such as sale shows or futurities, may have special procedures and policies that need to be addressed.

Once the show begins, the judge should project confidence and professionalism, but not arrogance. Judges should stay focused on their job in the ring, and avoid outside distractions such as checking a cell phone during the show, talking with spectators outside the showring, or spending too much time visiting with the show staff.

The judge’s attire

When agreeing to serve as a show judge, individuals place themselves at a level of authority above all others attending the show, and thus they should dress accordingly, Mullinix says.

“A judge should strive for a professional appearance while in the ring,” he explains. “This includes being clean-shaven, well-groomed and dressed appropriately for the species and level of show. I personally have never worn jeans to judge a show.”

Mullinix recommends judges wear neat, starched or pressed slacks and shirt. Ward agrees, and feels that a shirt and tie is an appropriate choice for any show, no matter the size or scope.

“It is an honor to be asked to judge at any show, whatever the level, and I treat it as such,” Ward says, adding that judges should wear a jacket or sports coat if judging at

CONTINUED ON PAGE 136

Judging With Professionalism CONTINUED FROM PAGE 135

bigger shows and if the weather fits.

A cowboy hat is also a common accessory for livestock judges, depending on their comfort level. Williams, a native Texan, wears a cowboy hat at nearly every show he judges, as he feels this identifies him to the crowd and exhibitors and adds to the professional image of a livestock judge.

Ward — though not a cowboy-hat wearer himself — agrees that a cowboy hat is acceptable in the showring. However, he advises against any other headwear.

“Some are okay with judges wearing baseball caps in the ring, but I am not usually in that camp,” Ward says. The only exception, he says, would be if the cap were provided by the show management who specifically asked the judge to wear it.

Oral reasons

Along with the responsibility of evaluating the animals, judges are expected to verbally explain their placing decisions over the microphone after each class, division and championship. For some, placing the cattle is a breeze, but speaking on the microphone is a challenge. For these individuals, practice is the key.

“If you are not comfortable giving reasons, then make them short,” Ward advises. “At least give the exhibitors enough respect by giving them some of your thoughts, even if brief.”

“If someone can clearly relate their message about why they made a selection, then I am okay with them not being overly polished on the microphone,” he admits. “Times have really changed and, to be honest, some of the words being used in the showring today are much more elaborate than what I am used to.”

Styles for oral reasons vary, but the important thing is for judges to speak clearly, be positive, be encouraging and adequately explain the reasoning behind their placings.

“Use terms that are standard, accepted livestock vocabulary,” says Hawkins, who also advises that judges not try to invent ‘jargon terms.’

Williams recommends using phrases to which their livestock peers relate and understand, and using a variety of descriptive terms helps a judge to avoid sounding repetitive.

“When giving reasons, I try to compliment the exhibitors — especially in youth shows — and offer them positive encouragement,” Williams says. “You can do so much to boost a young person’s confidence when you praise them on the microphone.”

Ward says judges should keep reasons as

positive as possible, while still explaining the strengths and weaknesses of the animal.

“A lot of judges spend too much time talking about the negatives,” Ward says. “It’s easy to talk bad about something, but it is much more important to look for the positives and make sure to draw attention to those, especially in junior shows.”

Williams adds that when judging open shows, offer at least one positive attribute of every animal in the class, and address weaknesses with tact.

“The man showing the last-place bull may just have sold that calf to someone who’s watching in the stands,” Williams says. “So accentuate the positives, explain the negatives and remember that every animal — first or last place — has a value to someone.”

The most important thing is simply to tell the truth, he says.

After the show

When the show is completed, judges should finalize any paperwork or necessary details needed by the show officials.

“Judges should stick around the show for a few moments to talk to any exhibitor that wishes to approach them,” Ward says.

The judge should then promptly move to the photo backdrop to be in photographs of the championship animals. After the photographs are taken, most judges then enjoy a chance to leave the show area, rest their feet (and minds) and reflect on the day.

“Don’t go looking for certain individuals after the show is finished,” Ward says. “As soon as the exhibitors are done approaching you and the photos are taken, then your job is done.”

A judge’s professional behavior after the show is just as important as his behavior and performance during the show.

“If you are judging a show where you might need to stay to judge another show, or even go back to the barn to be associated with your own cattle like at a major show, stay clear of the particular breed you have already judged or may be judging in the near future,” Ward says.

Geuns says show judges should avoid “staying too long” after a show. In some foreign countries, it is expected for the judge to visit with each exhibitor after the show; however, in the United States, it is never appropriate for a judge to return to the barns for social activities where alcoholic beverages

are being consumed. Don’t seek out job evaluations from exhibitors about how you did judging that day, and don’t start second-guessing yourself.

At the end of the day, a true professional judge should hope that he or she has given a fair and honest evaluation of every exhibit and every entry at the show.

“A good judge will be satisfied from within,” Hawkins says. “Don’t expect great accolades for doing a good job. After all, that is

your task and that is what is expected. If you do a poor job, you can likely expect mega-criticism.”

Lifelong learning

Geuns reminds that it is important for judges to stay current with type preferences determined by the industry.

“Good judges should seek to continue learning by attending sales, shows, seminars and breed workshops,” he says.

Good judges also can watch and learn from each other, Williams says. “If I’m at a show where a fellow cattleman I respect is judging, I will make a point to watch a few classes and listen to these leading judges.”

Daniel agrees, adding that the most successful and memorable judges maintain the utmost level of professionalism and integrity, yet are always themselves and each bring his or her own unique personality to judging events.

“One of the best ways to get your name out and to be asked to judge is to be a good person. Take a job seriously. Be honest. Be cordial. Be humble. Nothing is more impressive to the crowd than humble confidence or as big a turnoff than perceived arrogance,” Daniel says.

The livestock judge can be the most beloved — or the most hated — person at the show. However, livestock shows and livestock judging will continue as many exhibitors agree: There’s just something about the thrill of competition.

Though judges’ popularity may come and go, the true professional livestock judges will maintain the core skills of providing fair evaluations of livestock through their knowledge, honesty, good communication skills and advocacy for the industry. In doing so, they most often become the role models and leaders.

“True professional judges should avoid ‘campaigning’ for judging jobs. Do a good job, and the jobs will come.”

— Ken Geuns