



Fit for a Champion



Accomplished fitter Kirk Stierwalt offers fitting advice to juniors during NJAS clinic.

Story & photos by **Mathew Elliott**

► Juniors and adults all gathered to watch and learn from cattle fitter Kirk Stierwalt.



Practice, practice, practice. These words are often used when working to improve a skill. But, knowing how to correctly practice is just as important as the practice itself. Kirk Stierwalt, accomplished cattle fitter, provided helpful tips while teaching junior clipping and fitting skills at the 2007 National Junior Angus Show (NJAS).

The arena had one heifer ready to be fit and was full of children and adults alike, excited about learning from one of fitting's best.

"It's not the hair [that comes] off, it's where the hair comes off of," Stierwalt said as he started his presentation. He emphasized that it's not always best to take a lot of hair off when clipping. More important is which part of the animal you take hair off of. From there he began his five tips for better fitting.

► Stierwalt explains his top tips for better fitting.



Tips for better fitting

1. Prepare the hair.

"Shows are won at home," Stierwalt said. "The shows are a place to show what hard work you've done preparing the hair."

2. Have the right equipment.

Stierwalt explained that the biggest problem people face is trying to do everything with one blade. He says that this is not good. Later in his presentation he explained the different types of blades and their purposes.

3. Have sharp equipment.

Stierwalt emphasized the importance of sharp equipment by a quick quote on how cattle fitters can be a different sort of breed. "As cattle people, we get jacked up about

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sharp equipment,” he said. “If anyone else was to cut themselves with a clipper, they might wince and shake their hand. As cattle people, if we cut ourselves, we’re like, ‘Cool, we’re going to make things happen now.’”

4. Find faults in your animal.

How else can you make your animal better if you don’t know what you need to fix, Stierwalt asked the juniors in the crowd. “Find the faults in your animal and try to fix them, he explained. “Fitting is sort of an optical illusion.”

5. Train your animals to stand with their heads up.

“There’s a big difference between broke animals and show-broke animals,” Stierwalt said, describing the differences. A halter-trained animal might not run all over the showring, but it could give you some difficulties and not want to stand correctly. A show-trained animal will stand and set up for you, with its head up looking its best.

He said one way to get cattle show-trained is to tie their heads up. Even if you couldn’t tie them with their heads up every day, trying to do it three or four days in a

week, or even once a week could help you in the showring.

Types of blades

After the tips on how to become a better fitter, Stierwalt took time to explain the different types of blades he uses when clipping cattle.

According to Stierwalt, the super lock blade is very unforgiving. It comes to a sharp point and is best for trimming. The medium blending blade is good for back raking, and is much safer than locks. The T 84, named because it comes to a T, is “all detail.” The HT $\frac{5}{8}$ is good for clipping the neck and some of the wiry hair around the brisket.

Ryan Long, Blue Mound, Ill., said he learned a lot about clipper blades from the presentation.

“I’ve done some clipping, but I didn’t know much about the blades,” Long said. “Today, I really learned how to clip, and I’m going to do some things differently now.”

A point-to-point process

Stierwalt continued his presentation by giving the juniors some advice on a little bit of everything. He told the crowd that mistakes happen sometimes. “Anyone who hasn’t nicked one, hasn’t done very many. It happens to the best of the best,” he said.

That’s why he recommends starting your clip job on the non-judging side — the left side — of the animal. If you make a small



► Above: Juniors enter their names into a bucket for several prize drawings, including a new set of clippers.

► Right: Stierwalt explains that clipping is a point-to-point process.



mistake there, it's not on the "show side," the side presented to the judge in class, and could be a little more forgiving while being evaluated.

That being said, he recommended to always be as careful as possible, because once the hair is on the ground, it's hard to stick it back on the animal.

Another piece of advice Stierwalt offered is to always be cautious of starting to clip once your animal has started coughing, especially when it's cold outside and you've washed your animal.

You'll usually get one or two coughs, and then a pause, Stierwalt said. Don't start clipping again, because usually there's a big final cough that could really mess you up if you start back too early.

Stierwalt also spoke on the importance of good scotch combs. "Combs are like humans," Stierwalt said, "they're best if they have all of their teeth." That way all the hairs are going the right way and none are missed, which is why he prefers to use a normal comb when clipping instead of using a skip-tooth comb.

Animal comfort was another important factor explained. "Keep the chute comfortable for the calf," Stierwalt said. "If it gets uncomfortable, it'll jump around and be a pain to clip." He advised doing this by not tying the head up too high, not shutting the neck in too tight or just thinking about the animal's general comfort.

When someone asked a question about clipping speeds Stierwalt joked, "The only time I use a low speed when clipping is on the way to the high speed."

By the end of the presentation, the heifer in the chute had white paint sprayed all over for everyone to get a good visual. There were areas marked with dollar signs symbolizing the "money spot" for that heifer. There were also big NO's and X's to show where not to clip.

"Clipping is a point-to-point process. Sometimes you're trying to connect points, other times you're creating more points to connect later," Stierwalt explained.

Spray bottles and cans flew through the air, as Stierwalt ended his clinic by giving juniors in the audience some supplies. The final prize was a new set of clippers, given to a winner drawn from a bucketful of names.

Joe Fulbright, Vale, N.C., said he found the clinic very helpful. When asked about his prior clipping experiences, Fulbright said he had just a little.

"Today I learned how to clip," Fulbright

said. "This is my first junior national. We drove 16 hours to get here, and I'm really excited for everything!"

Nancy Bickham, Saint Francisville, La., was also newer to clipping. "Today I really learned how to clip [a] calf right," Bickham said. "I especially learned a lot about clipping the tail. I now feel more confident about clipping in the future."

As everyone was leaving the arena,

parents and children were discussing what they'd learned, hoping to use their newfound knowledge. Whether it is in the team-fitting contest, getting their cattle ready for the NJAS or any other fitting opportunity, these juniors will be better prepared to fit their animal to its greatest advantage.



► The crowd looks on as Stierwalt demonstrates how to clip the neck and shoulder.



► Follow this pattern for clipping success.