

Beef Showmanship

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A good showman is a person that has a sense or knack for an effective presentation of an animal. Showmanship is the one area of exhibiting beef cattle over which you have the most control. In showmanship, you are judged on your abilities to control and present your steer or heifer to bring out its best characteristics. Advanced planning and hard work are the key to becoming a good showperson. Showing beef cattle not only generates enthusiasm and competition in the show ring, but also teaches valuable lessons that can be used in day to day life. These lessons include responsibility, learning about work and determination to reach a goal, winning graciously and losing with dignity.

Start Early

Success in beef cattle showmanship starts at home. The first step is to halter break your calf. Properly put a rope halter on the calf and allow the lead rope to drag on the ground for two to three days. This makes the calf aware of the halter. Next, tie the calf for an hour, working up to three to five hours a day. During this time, brush your calf. This will assist in calming the animal and will allow it to become accustomed to you. With time, your calf will respond to your hand movements with a halter and showstick.

Training your calf to walk, stop, and set up easily will take time and patience. First, try to lead the calf to and from water and feed. Then begin leading the calf around the barnyard. Make sure the calf is accustomed to setting up with the halter and showstick. Practice in several short segments, not long drawn out sessions. After the calf is used to being walked and set up, practice having another person move in close to handle the calf with you at the halter. This will allow the calf to remain calm under a judge's close inspection.

Using the Halter

The halter should be properly placed on the calf's head with the lead strap on the calf's left side. The halter strap that crosses over the muzzle or nose of the calf should be two inches from the eye. Rope halters and show halters can be adjusted for proper fit. Do not have the halter too big so that the nose cross piece is down by the mouth.

When leading, you should be on the calf's left side with the halter in your right hand. Your hand should be six to twelve inches from the animal's head. With show halters, this is usually at the junction of the chain and leather strap. Firmly grab over the strap so that your thumb is closest to you, not under the strap. Your wrist is stronger this way and gives you more control over the animal.

The strap length should be long enough for control, but not long enough to touch the ground. If the strap of the show halter can touch the ground, you or the calf may step on it and it becomes awkward to switch hands. Any extra strap may be folded and held in the right hand, or the extra length may be held in your left hand. If the strap is long, holding the extra length in your left hand is preferred. If the calf is spooked you will have two hands on the strap. DO NOT wrap the halter strap around your hand or fingers in order to prevent any injury.

Using the Showstick

There are five basic uses for the showstick. They are to:

- assist in placing the feet
- calm the animal
- control the animal
- keep the top straight
- scotch-drive

When setting up your calf smoothly switch the lead strap from your right hand to your left hand. At the same time, switch your showstick from your left hand to your right hand. Slowly scratch your calf's belly a couple of times to help calm your animal and then set the feet in the appropriate position. Remember that you have two tools in your hands to set the feet. One is the halter, the other is your showstick. If you want a rear foot to be moved back, push backward on the halter and press (do not jab) the soft tissue where the hoof is split with your showstick (Figure 1). If you want a rear foot to move forward, pull forward on the halter and apply pressure with your showstick under the dew claw (Figure 1). Remember it is easier for the animal to put a foot back than forward. When the rear feet are too close together apply pressure to the inside of a leg just above the hoof and they should stand wider.

Figure1: Proper use of showstick in placement of the feet.

Front feet can be moved by using your boot or showstick to apply pressure in the previously mentioned areas while pushing or pulling with the halter in the desired direction you want the foot to move. Younger, less experienced showpersons will be safer if they use the showstick.

Placement of the feet depends on what view is provided to the judge and what makes the animal look its best. When the cattle are lined up side by side, in a straight line, the feet should be set at all four corners under the animal bearing their full share of the animal's weight. At this view, the judge is looking at the rear and front of the animal. When the cattle are lined up head to tail, the feet should be set as if a professional photographer is taking a picture. The rear feet should be staggered so that the farside foot is slightly in front of the foot closest to the judge. Usually a heel to toe relationship works best (Figure 2). That means the heel of one foot is parallel with the toe of the other foot. The front feet

should be set square or staggered less than the rear feet. The toe of the front foot away from the judge should be set back half the width of the hoof on the judges side. By setting the feet in this manner, you provide the judge with a perception of depth and thickness. It also makes it easier to correct a topline and rump structure.

Figure 2: Set up when viewed on the profile.

The showstick can also be used to correct a topline. If the top is weak and needs to be raised, simply apply pressure at the naval or the flank with the hook of the showstick. If the rump is steep and the loin is high, apply pressure to this area to bring it down. Then continue to scratch the animal's belly to keep it calm.

The showstick may also be used to help control your calf while walking and to "scotch-drive". While showing, always keep the point of the showstick down for safety reasons. While walking, the showstick is in your left hand at the handle or about one-third of the way down. This will allow use of the showstick as an additional control tool if needed. If the animal is moving too fast simply use the portion of the stick between your left hand and tip or hook end for tapping the nose. Never hit or beat, merely tap on the nose.

"Scotch-driving" is when your calf will not lead or walk and no one is around to help you get started. If this happens simply push forward on the halter with your right hand and tap the animal with the showstick on its side or rump. This will make the animal think someone is behind it and it should start to walk.

Using the Scotch Comb

The scotch comb should be carried in your back pocket, or in a scotch comb sheath with the teeth toward you. This is for safety and courtesy reasons as you would not want someone else to get injured due to your equipment.

The scotch comb is used to groom the hair that may become messed up from the judge, another person handling your calf or another animal bumping it. The corner of the scotch comb may also be used to apply pressure to the loin or top to straighten the topline, like the showstick.

Showtime

Prior to the show, inspect the show ring to find any high and low spots of the show ring surface. This will help you to avoid these areas when setting up your calf. When possible, position your animal so that the front feet are placed on higher ground than the rear feet.

Dress neatly. Leather boots should be worn for safety and appearance reasons. If the calf steps on your foot, the calf's foot will slip off a leather boot much easier than a tennis shoe, with less opportunity for injury. Wear nice jeans or slacks. Faded bluejeans look less professional and should not be worn.

Wear a nice button-down or polo shirt that is pleasing to the eye. No camouflage shirts or T-shirts should be worn. Also, tuck your shirt in and wear a belt for neatness. Leave hats back at the grooming area. Hats may distract the judge's concentration. Planning and neat appearance will help you to gain success.

Enter the show ring promptly when your class is called and have the proper equipment. Be sure to have the correct exhibitor number, showstick, and scotch comb. If you are not in the first class, it is helpful to watch a class or two so that you know where to line up and how the classes will move through the show ring.

Generally cattle are lined up side by side to start a class. When pulling into line, look where you will be and head into that position. Do not simply follow the person in front of you as this usually ends up in an "S" configuration. You can end up brushing against the calf that was in front of you as you pull into line. When pulling into line, "check" your animal a few feet before reaching your destination to slow the animal. To "check" your animal, simply lift up slightly on the halter so that the animal knows you are about to stop. As you walk into the ring, line up where the ring person indicates. If you are third or fourth in the ring, line up even with the other calves, leaving three or four feet on both sides of your animal. This allows ample room for all exhibitors to set up the calves. Smoothly, yet quickly, get your calf set up as discussed earlier with the head held high. Be alert, keep a close eye on your calf, keep the feet set square, and know where the judge is located. If your calf is not set square and the judge is nearby, set your calf up. Most judges will wait for you to present your calf in the best way. Always allow the judge to see the view he or she is seeking. Try not to get between the judge and the animal. When it is time to walk the cattle, move as the judge or ring person instructs, either left or right. Most likely, you will pull the cattle up to the rail, turn left, go three fourths of a circle, and walk right behind the other cattle in the side by side line. If the exhibitor in front of you is having trouble, help them. Tap the animal's rump with your showstick or preferably put your showstick in your right hand and twist the tail of the calf in front of you with your left. Being courteous to others is a must.

When walking, let the animal walk out freely. Stop in a straight line head to tail (profile). Remember to "check" your calf and then stop by lifting the head. Allow four to six feet between your calf and the one in front. This will allow the judge space to move freely around the cattle and help to prevent your calf from mounting the other calf. Position the feet as discussed earlier for the profile and keep the topline straight with the calf's head up. Locate the judge and calmly waft. Do not "saw" your animal in half with rapid stick movement while wafting for the judge. Use slow deliberate strokes with the showstick. The judge may handle the cattle and ask you a few questions. Do not make noises or rattle the chain of the halter.

As the judge moves around your animal, move a half step back to allow the judge the full view he or she seeks. Be prepared to answer questions about your animal: weight, birthdate, sire, dam, pregnancy status of your heifer, feeding program, parts of the animal, yield grade, quality grade, and where retail cuts of meat come from. If your animal has not moved and the judge has gone to the next animal, use the scotch comb to

fix the hair that has been messed up. If the animal has moved or gotten out of line, pull your animal out in a clockwise circle in the ring and move the animal back into line. Set the animal up and then fix the hair. It is more important to first have the animal set correctly and looking its best as the hair may be minor compared to how the animal is standing.

Figure 3: Switching positions.

Be alert and aware of the judge. Look for a sign or motion to be pulled into line for the placing. This may be another profile line or side by side. As the judge pulls cattle from the profile line, empty spaces will occur. If two or more spaces between cattle become empty, move forward in the line. Remember your spacing and set your calf up at its best. By moving forward and filling the empty spaces, you help the judge by making it easier to make comparisons. Once pulled into a side by side line you are nearing the end of the class, but it is not over. Pull into the side by side line as discussed earlier, stay alert and set the animal up. Sometimes positions may be switched. Shown above are some situations that may occur (Figure 3). Please note that you pass back through the same hole that you left and to the proper position.

If you are positioned up to a rail, do not turn around in the line. Back your animal out by pushing back on the halter with your left hand and applying pressure with your right at the point of the shoulder. Then pull into the line at the instructed position.

When the judge starts his reasons the class is over, but your job is not. You should continue to work hard and display good sportsmanship. Leave the ring in an orderly manner as instructed by the ringperson and pick up your awards.

Exhibitor Courtesy and Sportsmanship

Remember to keep straight lines so that the judge can compare all the animals. If you are blocking the view of another animal and have space, move so that the judge can see all animals. However, if you are the one hidden, it is your responsibility to be where your animal can be seen. Do not rely on the other exhibitor as he or she may not have room to move. On the profile, pull back in line where space is available. This may be at the end of the line. Avoid bumping, crowding, or hitting other animals. If your animal becomes nervous or unruly, act like a professional. Be patient, remain calm, and never get discouraged or lose your temper. Finally, congratulate the class winners and those that stood ahead of you. Remember this is a learning experience. Leave the ring with your head held high, knowing that you have given this project your best effort. Learn from your mistakes, watch other showpersons, and improve your skills for the next show. You are a winner by trying and participating in a worthwhile fun activity.

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