

The Art of Grooming Show Cattle

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Cattle grooming — is it an art or science? Well, it is probably a little of both, but it is more art than you would think. Just about anybody can wash cattle, blow them dry, and take a pair of clippers to them. But, does the result show off the best attributes of the animal or hide its flaws? Probably not, and this is where the art of grooming show cattle comes in.

Walk through the yards or the bottom floor of the Hall of Education at the National Western Stock Show and you will be bombarded by the whine of blowers and the hum of clippers. There is grooming going on everywhere. It is a constant process and the goal is to make a bull or cow that looks like any other you would see on the other side of the fence into a fluffy rock star.

Some ranchers groom their own stock and some hire the professional groomers that are always on hand at big stock shows like the NWSS. However the grooming is done, it is very labor intensive. Chuck Downey of Douthit Herefords in St. Francis, Kansas, says, “We usually do the rough cut back at the ranch and let the groomers finish up when we get here. It costs about \$100 per animal for the whole job.”

Amie Sertzbach of Lewisville, Ohio, is a professional groomer and she and her husband have been raising prize Angus cattle for 19 years. Last year they had the Reserve Champion Angus Female at the National Western Stock Show. Amie was kind enough to share some of the techniques of professional cattle grooming.

The overall objective when grooming cattle, according to Sertzbach is, “You want to give the animal the best overall conformation that you possibly can. You want to hide any flaws that they might have and you want to emphasize all of the good points that the animal has. For instance, if they are extremely elongated up through the neck, or they are big hipped, stout legged, or have lots of bone, you want to groom so that you show that off. Whatever good qualities that animal has, you want to display it to the best of its ability.”

As most show animals are sold to ranchers who use them for breeding, characteristics that imply that the animals would do that are emphasized. As Amie puts it, “You want the females to look feminine, soft, and ‘lady’ looking after grooming. You want the bulls to be heavier boned and masculine.”

After the rough cut, the animal’s hair is washed, conditioned, and blown dry, prior to the final grooming. “What we do is try our best to get the hair coat as shiny, as soft, and as long as possible. The more hair you have, the more flaws you can hide.” Amie said.

The variety of tools and products used for grooming is amazing. Out in the yards, there is a trailer that sells anything you could possibly need to groom an animal. They have seven different types of combs, an ergonomically shaped squeegee to remove excess water after washing, a powered 'Roto Fluffer' to remove guard hairs, high velocity blowers for drying, chutes especially designed to hold the cattle during grooming, huge turbo fans to keep a constant flow of air moving through the animals hair and more clipper and blade combinations than you can count. There is even a special neoprene neck wrap that is used in combination with a 'sweating lotion' to make the neck skin tighter on females and give them a more 'feminine' look.

There is a dazzling array of chemical products such as shampoos, conditioners, adhesives including a special one just for the tail, mousse, oil, dyes, paints in six different shades, hair builder, hair polish, sun screen, and removal products to get all this stuff off the hair.

Stertzbach is quick to point out that, while all of these products are available, it is rare that all of them are used. Most work that is done uses only shampoo, conditioner, oil, adhesive, and clippers.

On the use of adhesives Amie says, "Sometimes hair may not lay just right. You want it smooth in all areas. It's almost like hair spray for women. It gets all the hair in the right spot and covers any holes. It's a lot like doing your own hair."

In the yards and stalls you will notice that there are large fans blowing on the animals all the time and owners using a blower on animals that are not wet. Amie shed some light on that, "The more air that is moved through an animal's hair, the cleaner the hide and the more the hair will grow. We also use hair conditioner and put a lot of oil in their hair to make it shine and look its best.

This may seem like a lot of work, but when you consider that in 2009, the Grand Champion Steer at the Junior Livestock Auction sold for \$50,000 and \$75,000 was the sale price for the 2009 high selling Angus Bull lot, it is definitely worth the effort for these animals to look their very best.



Animals are washed and then they are blow dried prior to the final shaping and cutting of the hair.