

TIMING IS

Everything



The work to put in 90, 60 and 30 days before the big show...

by RHONDA NIDA MCCURRY

Walking a heifer or steer into a show ring is not a last-minute decision.

To be competitive, it takes months of care, feeding and grooming to make an animal look “12 o’clock.” The families who show cattle – and other livestock – have spent considerable time halter breaking, mixing feed rations, working with a show stick, rinsing, washing, blowing and of

course, clipping to get their calf in the best condition to earn the judge’s favorable nod.

The amount of work put into a show cattle project isn’t easy, but there are methods to making it successful. Here are a few tips from a show family who has perfected the way they prepare heifers and steers for the ring.

Dan May, Stillwater, Okla., grew up in 4-H and FFA, with both his parents exhibiting cattle across the country. He made a career of buying, selling and trading cattle and when his daughter, Jacee, was born in 1992, May chose to begin a bred-and-owned Angus program for her, in case she wanted to show one day.

Today, Jacee is a sophomore at Black Hawk Community College and serves on its livestock judging team. Her show resume is filled with awards and titles, but her father says that’s not how her show career began.

May says at the age of 9, Jacee was petite and a little afraid of showing, though she liked being in the barn and at the show. At age 11, she was able to comfortably exhibit her heifers after months of practice at home. This, he says, made all the difference in her show career.

“A lot of parents who might have shown and been successful themselves want their kids to begin right away at a young age,” May says. “That first year I believe it’s all about getting the animal in and out of the ring without a hitch. A friend of mine says the animal should be ‘bomb-proof.’”

90-days out

Ninety days before a show, May says a junior should make serious decisions about the animal they are going to exhibit. One of first things he looks for is a calm attitude. At this stage he says a person should be able to tell if the calf will be docile or if it’s easily upset.

He also recommends keeping an eye out for a small, local show to give the animal

experience. Even if the heifer stands in the middle or lower end of the class, as long as the exhibitor and animal complete the experience together, it is a success.

“That first time in the ring will tell a lot about whether the kid and calf will bond to each other,” May says. “If you have a calf that has everything right about it but it has the wrong attitude, then you might need to find another calf. Ninety days out gives you time to do that.”

It is also critical to concentrate on the visual appeal of the animal. May says he looks for all the right parts, including conformation, skeleton and muscle structure. Another key point is the animal’s ability to consume feed. He says to watch the calf eat, and then evaluate whether it is picky or a good eater. This knowledge becomes even more important down the road, he says.

“If you are feeding an animal with a weak top, the larger it gets the harder that fault will be to mask,” he says. “Or if the calf is tight in its flank but is a good eater, that can be handled with proper nutrition.”

May says to watch for common illnesses like ringworm and lice as well, to eliminate the chance of it interfering with hair care closer to show day.

60-days out

Now it’s two months before the show and time to step up the daily hair-care program. Prior to this, a junior might have been working the animal’s hair once or twice a week, including washing and blowing. May says the calf should be on a regular feeding schedule and be used to eating at the same time, morning and night. The goal, he says, is to create a consistent schedule for the animal so it can predict what will happen at home and at the show.

“Cattle are big-time creatures of habit,” May says. “So you want to create the habit you need them to have at a show.”

At 60 days, May says the time is right to implement a show stick into the daily chore routine. The trick is to not overdo it. He recommends walking the animal into a semi-perfect stance and scratching it for just a few minutes. Then, May says, let the animal loose for the evening.

The next day, increase scratching time to five minutes then let the animal go again. Building up the amount of time

spent using a show stick teaches the calf to respond to the habit of being led into position, being set up and scratched, and then being rewarded at the end by being let loose.

If the weather is rough at 60 days, May says to keep a dry, clean place for animals to lie. This doesn't mean babying them too much. In fact, he says, keeping livestock out of the elements entirely can be detrimental in the long run, especially for a heifer who will one day calve and live in a pasture setting without protection.

"Cattle are bred for all kinds of weather, but getting show animals some cover from harsh rain, hail or high winds sure helps," he says.

a critical time for steers

The 60-day mark is also a time to monitor weight for steer projects. Having access to or owning scales is imperative to get an accurate weight of the animal every two weeks. May says this is when the previous 90-day evaluation of the animal's eating habits comes into play.

"Figure out feeding habits but also feed conversion, that's a must," he says. "If an animal is an easy doer and converts well, you have to watch them to keep from being over or underdone, depending on their eating habit."

In addition, steers that are going to a terminal show will be drug tested. If a common ailment hits, like foot rot, for example, giving the animal penicillin and sulfa will help it heal, but those drugs might be hard to explain after the animal has been harvested. The way to avoid this situation, May says, is to offer preventative health treatments and watch the animal during rough weather.

"It's really important to be able to see things down the road that can be avoided," he says. "Stay on top of the animal's health so you're covered and don't have to face a decision that can make or break your project."

For juniors showing registered cattle, it is also important to read the rulebook for a show. This may sound simple, but rules can change each year for every show. May encourages juniors to get on the phone with their breed association or check the requirements online to be aware of registration paper issue dates, and ownership and entry deadlines. He also says to make sure ears are tattooed and that paperwork is in order.

one month to go

The calendar date of show day is circled in red and it is now one month away. All of the efforts a junior has placed on feeding, hair care and preventative health are just about to pay off.

Nutrition at this 30-day stage should be kept consistent but can be modified if the animal is putting on too much weight. In the case of show heifers, May says to reduce the amount of energy, or corn, she consumes. He likes to feed pregnant show heifers a ration of one part beet pulp, one part oats and one part mixed feed, which includes cottonseed hulls, corn and protein.

"If you do that, you'll lay on not so much fat but keep good muscle tone and keep her looking fresh," he says.

This is also the time frame when hair care is of utmost importance. May remembers the challenge for his daughter of showing cattle and balancing extracurricular activities. Though many shows are during super-busy months regarding athletics and academics, having help from family members can ensure hair work and feeding get done.

At this stage, the heifer or steer should be rinsed once or twice a day, with daily doses of Kleen Sheen™, hair brushing and a complete blow dry. Once a week, May recommends washing the calf with a light detergent shampoo, either an inexpensive over-the-counter brand or a show supply product. A Mane 'n Tail® type of conditioner is also important, especially in the winter, to prevent or cure flakiness on dry skin.

One of the keys to good hair on show day is to blow the animal completely dry each time it is rinsed. A blower continues to clean the animal even after a good wash or rinse because it removes the dirt that sits against the hide. Rather than spending a lot of time combing, May says to blow the animal dry, and just when you think it's enough, blow for another 30 minutes.

Pictured Right: Dan May (right), Stillwater, Okla., grew up showing cattle and raised his daughter, Jacee (left), in the business, as well. His timeline of show preparation tips can help a junior know what to watch for at 90, 60 and 30 days from the show. Also pictured is Dan's wife, Leanne.

"This is where a lot of people drop the ball," he says. "You can take an average calf and spend time on its hair and make it look great. A lot of folks don't get the animal truly clean and this affects the hair. There are no short cuts to this step. Getting the animal dry just takes time."

And if the time isn't there to rinse and blow dry every day, a junior may need help from a sibling, parent or family member.

"The most successful programs the ones who have family to help," he says. "There are all kinds of situations but in a home, even when parents don't live together, it takes coordination from mom and dad and sometimes outside help to make it all work. In our operation, Jacee's job was to show the animal correctly. My job was to find the right heifer and get it quiet. Everything in between was a shared responsibility."

May says a junior can also call on ag teachers and young professionals to offer advice and guidance. Having outside help is not a negative in May's mind, because he says the goal of any beef project is to not only raise good cattle but to also raise juniors who learn how to compete fairly, keep perspective and become good young men and women.

No matter the age of the exhibitor or the calf, maintaining a consistent and comfortable timeline produces a good show project. May says the activity is definitely built around family, working together and being responsible for your own success. Though Jacee is at the end of her show career, May says he just might be at it again if two-and-a-half year old son, Jacob, decides he wants to show cattle.

May's biggest piece of advice for juniors is to keep smiling. He says there are shows that will go well and some that won't go as intended, but a positive attitude is a must at all stages of the show timeline.

