



COVERING Your BASES

by CHRISTY COUCH LEE

before you hit the road for the next livestock show and leave school behind for a few days, ensure you've done the work at home.



BECCA OLIVER

Loading up for that next big livestock show is such a rush. Friends to see. Awards to be won. And sometimes, taking a few days' break from school.

But before you load up and hit the road, have you covered your bases with your teachers and coaches? And do you have everything ready at home and in the barn?

Becca Oliver, Leo, Ind.; Zoe Cummins, Elgin, Okla.; and Tommy Fletcher, Universal City, Texas, realize the importance of being prepared before leaving for a show or livestock event. Each averaging two weeks to a month of missed school per year for such events, they say the most important thing a student can do is communicate with teachers and coaches, be prepared and stay ahead.

a long time in training

Oliver is a junior at Garrett High School. She is involved in many activities, including basketball, track, FFA and student council, in addition to showing hogs and sheep through 4-H since third grade.



ZOE CUMMINS

Each year, Oliver attends the Indiana State Fair, World Pork Expo, American Royal, many shows in the Indiana Junior Show Circuit and the North American International Livestock Exposition (NAILE) in Louisville, Ky. She's also attending the National Western Stock Show (NWSS) in Denver, Colo., for the first time in 2012. She estimates she misses about two weeks of school to attend these events.

Cummins has been raised in a farming family and has shown hogs and given speeches competitively for years. In addition to being actively involved in FFA, this junior also plays basketball and soccer and runs cross country.

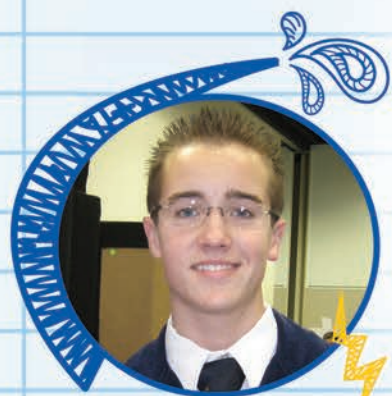
She travels often to livestock shows – many local jackpots in the area, which she attends on weekends. Cummins estimates she misses about 30 days a year – some half days – for livestock shows and speech contests.

Sometimes, shows can overlap with basketball commitments, she says.

"I usually take a few hours off from a show to go back for basketball games or practice, and dad will help me with feeding," she says. "Then, I head back to finish what I need to do."

And, Cummins says, springtime brings many FFA speech contests and soccer games and practices, which can conflict.

"I have to prioritize," she says. "Speaking will take me further in life, and I think it's worth it. Plus, I really enjoy it."



TOMMY FLETCHER

Fletcher is a sophomore at Judson High School and is active in the Judson FFA. Showing livestock since third grade, he currently is raising eight animals – steers, lambs and goats – while maintaining a straight-A grade average. In the past, he has competed on the baseball team, and this year, he's competing in wrestling.



Above: Oliver has seen great success in the ring, including capturing the reserve grand champion barrow title at the 2010 Indiana State Fair. Right: Oliver exhibiting the reserve grand champion barrow at the Indiana State Fair Spotlight Sale.



Below Left: Fletcher in the showing at the 2011 San Antonio Livestock Exposition Junior Livestock Show. Below Right: Fletcher (right) receives the 2011 National FFA Agriscience Fair Award for Microbiology/Biochemistry/Food Science Division I at the FFA National Convention from Wyatt DeJong, Central Region National FFA Vice-President.



Each year, Fletcher attends three or four Majors – including the San Antonio Stock Show, Houston Livestock Show, Fort Worth Stock Show and the Star of Texas – in addition to numerous prospect and minor shows. He estimates he misses about 30 days of school each year for these events.

They say the No. 1 job of a livestock showman in school is to maintain communication with your teachers.

talk to the teacher

Oliver says teachers and coaches need plenty of notice before you will be gone for a livestock event.

“At least a few days in advance of my trip, I go to all of the teachers and tell them the days I will be gone, and why,” she says. “I get my assignments ahead of time, so they can be turned in on time.”

Fletcher takes it one step further, providing his teachers with his show schedule at the beginning of the year, once he knows the show dates. Then, he reminds them again as the dates approach.

“I give them plenty of notice, so they can have the work prepared for me,” he says. “Then, I work on it before and during the show. I like to be caught up by the time I get back to school.”

Before Cummins leaves for an event, she also goes to each teacher asking for homework.

“And, if I have a question over something I’m working on, I can come in 10 or 15 minutes early the day I return, and they are great to help me,” she says.

Oliver says some teachers are more understanding than others, when it comes to missing school for livestock shows.

“I usually try to get homework assignments before I go, so I can do it and have it done by the time I get back,” she says. “I take my laptop with me, and teachers also e-mail homework and assignments while I’m away.”

Cummins says the teachers at Elgin High School are supportive of the FFA chapter.

“They know we’re going to be gone, and they can’t prevent that,” she says. “They respect that and like for us to be well rounded. I get my homework done before I leave, and they don’t have a problem with it.”

Applying yourself while at school also leads to teachers being more understanding when you’re gone, Oliver says.

“I do fairly well as a student, and my teachers expect me to do well with homework,” she says. “I usually don’t have a problem unless it’s close to finals, when I need to be there to do the reviews.”

Fletcher has encountered a few teachers who don’t understand livestock shows or the schedule he maintains.

“If they can’t help me, I have to switch to a teacher who will,” he says. “And, if teachers aren’t able to give me homework before I leave, I do it afterwards.”

Oliver has been known to work on homework while in the barns at a show.



Above: Cummins (center, front) is dedicated to FFA speech competitions, having won the 8th, 9th and 10th divisions at the state competition. Left: Working with her hogs -- both at the show and at home -- is also critical for Cummins' success.



“During the American Royal this year, I wasn’t doing anything for the show, so I got out my computer to work on homework,” Oliver says. “Everyone gave me a hard time, asking why I was doing my homework on what should be a vacation.”

Cummins says her homework has traveled to unique places with her, as well.

“I work on homework during my free time, so I don’t have to work on it when I’m tired or when I get home,” she says. “Even to the National FFA Convention or in restaurants at an event – my homework goes with me to many strange places.”

When preparing to miss school, it’s also critical to keep your coaches informed, these students say.

communicate with coaches

Oliver says her school has an active FFA chapter, and coaches are used to working with their chapter’s schedule. Even so, at the beginning of each sport season, she presents her coaches with her show schedule for the coming months.

“When I have to miss a practice or a game, they understand it’s a commitment I have,” she says. “Even if I have to sit out a game, I really like showing pigs. It’s a big part of my life and a big commitment for me.”

Cummins approaches coaches at least a week in advance before an event, and she reminds them throughout the week of when she’ll be missing.

“I remind the coaches often, so they’re not shocked when I’m gone,” she says. “My coaches understand that my family and I are big into FFA, and we have a successful chapter. I have to let them know what’s coming, and make arrangements to work around it.”

Fletcher also provides his coaches with his show schedule at the beginning of the year, by sending an e-mail to all who might be affected.

“I also remind my coaches a week before, as some of them don’t check e-mail often,” he says.

A few times, Fletcher has missed practices that resulted in him not getting to start a game.

“Sometimes, I may fall onto a lower team because others were there for practice,” he says. “But, I practice with friends and go over what is new when I get back. That helps make up for lost time, and helps me work my way back up on the roster.”

Once the school preparations have been made, it’s time to focus on the home front.

handling things at home

Before Oliver can leave for a show, she must get things ready at home and in the barn.

“I make sure we have everything ready in the barn – the showbox and the feed,” she says. “I also have to pack for myself and get my room cleaned. And, we make arrangements for my grandpa to feed the pigs at home while we’re gone.”

Much work goes into preparing the barn to be gone for a show, Cummins says.

“We work hard throughout the year, of course,” she says. “Then the night before a show, we try to get together our feed pans, clippers and everything we could need for a show. If we get it together the night before, we can just load the hogs and go in the morning.”

And when she adds the speech contests to her livestock chores, much time is involved.

“When preparing for a state contest, I spend probably two hours every night working on it,” Cummins says. “We do what it takes to win, and I like to win.”

Fletcher says he relies on good friends, who understand livestock, to care for his animals while he’s away at a show.

“We trust them to know what they’re doing, and we ask them to look after the animals we leave behind,” he says. “They will feed and water them, and make sure they’re safe and healthy.”

tips for success

When it comes to advice for others, these three students say a few tips can take you far.

Oliver says time management is the most critical skill a high-school showman can possess.

“You need to make sure you have enough time to get your work done,” she says. “Don’t wait until the last minute. In high school, you can fall behind if you just miss one day without being prepared, and it’s hard to catch up – especially if you are going to another show in a few weeks.”

Cummins advises students to get homework assignments early from teachers, and try to complete as much as possible before you leave for the event.

“Don’t wait until the last minute and fill in random answers,” she says. “You don’t have to take your homework with you everywhere you go – that’s a choice I make. But you do have free time, and it’s nothing you can’t handle. If you put the effort in, it’s not that hard.”

And Fletcher recommends students understand the school’s policy for missing classes, and to always get work done in the recommended time.

“Our school’s policy is that a student gets one day to make up a missed day, for every day missed,” he says. “For example, if you miss three days, you have three days to make up your work. I like to work ahead. Otherwise, I’m tired when I get back to school, then I put in a full day at school and have a lot of homework when I get home.”

By following these words of advice and by working ahead, young livestock showmen can find success – both on the road and in the school. It’s simply a matter of covering your bases.

