

# FITTING TO *perfection*

by RHONDA NIDA MCCURRY

Many people in the show cattle industry would say that the ability to clip and fit an animal to look perfect is an art form. The canvas is a clean, fresh heifer or steer that a junior exhibitor has spent months working on at home. The tools are a comb, clippers and cans of adhesive and paint. Oil is applied often at the end for shine. As the show animal enters the ring and the spotlight, many people stand back to admire the masterpiece.

Preparing a show heifer to look her best is not an easy task. Nor it is a simple process to properly fit and clip a show steer to emphasize his best features and hide his faults. Josh Elder, Dunlap, Iowa, has been fitting cattle for years, having attended his first show when he was just two days old.

He says the reason exhibitors fit cattle is to enhance the animal's best attributes. For instance, steer legs that have been groomed and clipped make the animal's bone and joints look smoother and appear as sound as possible. Leveling a heifer's top can help hide a low loin and fitting her belly can enhance her depth of body, making her more cowy and feminine.

Before the show begins, Elder says juniors should be aware of a calf's attributes and faults. Working hair at home ensures the best hair at the show and gives more of an opportunity to fit the animal the way you want, not the way you have to.

### *girls versus boys*

Many times, Elder has seen a heifer clipped too much like a show steer, with a tight loin and top. He says, instead, heifers need to look feminine and broody. When clipping, he says to leave hair on her back to give the appearance of more rib shape and being level across her top.

When it comes to legs, it's important to put curvature into a heifer, but a steer needs to look straight and bigger boned. Specifically with steers, use the hair to stouten and straighten his back legs while still putting some set into them. If a calf is especially hairy, Elder says to clip its legs to look proportional to the rest of the calf's body and understand the area you're trying to fix.

Front legs are also important on show day. Elder says the animal's front

end should slope from the point of its shoulder, down to its knee and all the way to its hoof, like the shape of a banana, for example. He warns against making an animal appear straight-fronted and says this can be avoided by taking hair off the knee and clipping the shoulders to feature a natural slope.

He also recommends fitting the inside of the front leg. It's easy to get in a hurry and forget, but this step can avoid a calf looking big jointed and large kneed. Elder says to pull the hair up on the inside of the front leg and work to smooth up the joints and knees all the way to the shoulder, blending in the front leg completely.

"On steers, you want front legs to look bigger to appear as stout as possible," he says. "You still want that slope in his front knee and shoulder so he doesn't look straight fronted. The same concept applies with heifers."

### *homework*

Jay Carr, Sudan, Texas, has been fitting cattle for years, thanks to the help and guidance of many people and mentors like Kirk Stierwalt. He said he enjoyed

## QUICK TIPS FROM THE EXPERTS



### JAY SAYS:

"Being able to recognize a steer or heifer's faults makes for a better fit and clip job. I believe clipping and fitting show cattle exists as a way to show off the work and effort a junior has put into their project at home."



### JOSH SAYS:

"Working hair at home ensures the best hair at the show and provides an opportunity to fit the steer or heifer the way you want, not the way you have to."



showing cattle as a kid but was much more interested in the fitting, clipping and selection of great show cattle than actually being in the ring.

Carr currently manages 70 head of fall- and spring-calving cows, with emphasis on raising crossbred black, grey or Hereford show steers. Being able to fit an animal, he says, is a way to show off the effort an owner puts into his or her operation all year. The right clip job presents the animal's best traits and makes a good calf look great.

The proper work at home on an animal's hair and nutrition go a long way to looking good on the big day. Carr says clipping and fitting legs is considered to be the most important step of show day prep, but he also believes a good hair coat on the calf's body, blown forward with some oil for shine, can make a bigger impact.

"A lot of people fit on legs for two hours and work on the calf's body for five minutes," Carr says. "But like when a pickup drives down the road, the first thing you see is the body of the pickup. Then you might notice its wheels."

### *variety*

Youth who show several breeds of cattle often have to deal with a variety of hair types on the animal's body. Angus cattle are known for straight, thin hair compared to a Maine-Anjou or Chianina that has long, fuzzy hair. Hereford and Charolais have a bit of curl to their hair and crossbreds can be a mix of all types.

In the heat of the summer it's no secret an animal will dry fast after being rinsed. In the fall and winter, when hair is at a maximum length, Carr says it is critical to blow hair forward at home and on show day until it is completely dry.

"Whether it's thick or curly hair, you have to blow hair forward to get the calf dry," he says. "Then you can start working it and get fluff, but not until that hair is bone dry. It has to be able to separate."

Also in summer, when a black-hided steer or heifer begins to shed, Carr says the hair must be combed out or sheared. He recommends a shedding brush, a tight comb or better yet, clippers to immediately take the hair off the animal's body, allowing new growth to have a fresh start.

### *it's show time*

On show morning, Carr likes to dry the animal after rinsing then use a sheen product to make the hair pop and to block



## STEP 1:

A daily routine of rinsing the animal and working its leg hair will prep that area for show day. Brush wet hair forward and slightly up, working with any natural patterns to train it forward.

REMEMBER

### DO THE WORK AT HOME

Proper work at home prior to the show will aid in show-day preparations. Carr suggests daily hair care consisting of blowing the hair forward with some oil for added shine and conditioning.

TRY TO AVOID

### DIRTY AND WET HAIR

On show day, make sure your animal is dry and clean. Grooming products do not work on wet or dirty hair.



## STEP 2:

Hold the adhesive can back about 12 inches and spray a couple light sprays. Comb through sprayed areas so they don't gum up and to lay hair the way you want. For painting hold can away 12 inches and spray lightly to cover the entire leg.

REMEMBER

### ALL ADHESIVES AREN'T THE SAME

Keep in mind the elements around you. Different glues and adhesives will work differently based on the climate. Adhesives won't work properly in conditions that are too hot or too cold.

TRY TO AVOID

### DUSTY AREAS FOR FITTING

Any dirt or dust that adheres to the hair will reduce the adhesive's effectiveness.



## STEP 3:

When clipping heifer legs, clip leg down so it looks proportionate and shows curvature. On steers, clip to make their leg appear stouter boned, with less curvature, while maintaining a nice set into the foot.

REMEMBER

### HEIFERS ARE NOT STEERS

When clipping legs, remember that heifers must look feminine and need more curvature to the leg, while steers should be left more straight and given the appearance of being bigger boned.

TRY TO AVOID

### LOOKING TOO FAKE

Even if an animal is exceptionally hairy, Elder says to be sure to clip legs to remain proportioned to their body.



## STEP 4:

After you have hair glued and clipped, build a leg by using tail adhesive and touch-up to fill in thinner hair and make the leg look fuller and smoother.

REMEMBER

### KNOW YOUR ANIMAL

There is no perfect animal, it is a fact we all must accept. However, knowing your animal and its flaws will help to fit that animal so that it looks its absolute best and flaws are reduced.

REMEMBER

### PRACTICE MAKES PERFECT

Attend a clinic, ask questions, or watch others to become more comfortable with your skills and abilities.

Photos courtesy of Lindsey Broek, *Maine-Anjou Voice*.



dirt. While the animal is in the chute, he likes to use a light oil in its body, holding the can in front of the blower to fog it in or combing it in.

“In Texas we don’t use a lot of oil when it’s hot but if the weather is dry and cold, oil can moisturize the calf’s hair and skin,” he says. “And you can’t use too much sheen on a daily basis.”

When he clips an animal, Carr is aware of its strong points and faults. He also says to clip a heifer differently than a steer – a reproductive package versus a terminal one.

“A steer is more about bone and muscle, so you give it a more defined, shapely or athletic look,” he says. “You want a heifer to look cowy and feminine.”

### keeping them fresh

There are times when a heifer or steer is shown at the beginning of the day, for example in the Angus breed. If it wins breed

or reserve champion, the calf might go back in for an overall champion drive several hours later. This is a tricky situation for exhibitors who have to make the decision to keep their heifer or steer from laying down and ruining the fit job already in place or to head straight to the wash rack then fit the animal again before the champion drive.

Elder says when choosing to keep a heifer up for a repeat performance, he places fit mats in the stall to let her stand on the softest bed possible. He also asks a person to stand on each side of the heifer to keep her from laying down or moving into a panel or another calf in the staff. He does like to tie the animal’s head down to eat hay and make the heifer comfortable, but having people in the stall to monitor and keep her standing is key.

If there is enough time to break her down, he’ll use Hocus Pocus, a product that will loosen adhesive, remove paint quickly and not leave oily residue. Right after she’s

washed, he’ll get her super-dry and allow her time to lay down. When it’s show time again, the heifer is put in the chute and bottle fogged with water, then fitting is repeated once again.

### know your calf

Carr says to know your animal’s faults when clipping in order to mask them as best as possible. If, for example, a steer is not big-boned, he believes in working leg hair at home to ensure there is more of it to fit into a better presentation on show day.

“None of us have seen the perfect animal,” he says. “We may love the one we have like crazy, but you have to accept the calf is not perfect in a particular area and help enhance that look the best you can with adhesives or clipping.”

**THE EXPERTS REVEAL THEIR SHOWBOX SECRETS!**

## WHAT’S INSIDE THEIR SHOWBOX?



### HAIR CONDITIONERS

Hair care is of the utmost importance, even when at the show.

### ADHESIVES

Find the type and brand that works best for you!



### COMBS & BRUSHES

They say you simply can never have enough of them.



### CLIPPERS & BLADES

A good clipper and sharp set of blades is always important. These guys suggest finding a pair you’re most comfortable with.



### FINISHING SPRAYS

Giving your animal a finishing shine helps it get noticed in the ring. These products can also be used as a hair conditioner.

### A POWERFUL BLOWER

This item ranks at the top of both Jay and Josh’s lists of must-haves.



### PAINTS & TOUCH-UPS

These experts suggest you find a brand and color that works best with your calf’s color.



### ELECTRICAL RESOURCES

Extension cords and power strips are always good to have, especially when attending a show with few power sources.



### SOAP OR SHAMPOO

Having a soap or shampoo is critical.