



Robbie Phillips shares his insight on how to clip your pig in a way to give him an extra edge in the show ring.

# *pampering* YOUR PIG

by RACHEL STINE

To your friends who grew up reading farm books about pink pigs rolling in the mud, the idea of washing and brushing, oiling and clipping an animal and then parading it for a judge to evaluate the way it looks and walks might seem ... well, funny.

Robbie Phillips, agricultural instructor and FFA advisor at Levelland High School in Levelland, Texas, has heard some of his students question the importance of making a hog look “pretty” for the show ring.

“I tell them it’s kind of like a beauty contest for livestock,” he says. “The best, the prettiest one always wins.”

But he doesn’t just tell them that – he instills in them a pride and a desire to do their best from the moment they step foot in his classroom.

## *beauty is more than skin deep*

By the time a showpig gets to the showing, the judge sees only the final product. But it’s the preparation that goes into the project that will lead to it looking its best on show day, Phillips says.

“We want the kids to take a lot of pride in what they do,” he says. “Our program teaches that work ethic is second to none.”

From an early time, he emphasizes getting out in the pen with the hogs – walking, cleaning pens, worming and taking care of them, especially their feet and legs.

“Our kids do a nice job of showing in the ring. The only way to do that is to get out and work with them,” he says.

Something that often gets overlooked, which Phillips emphasizes from the time

the kids get their animals, is brushing their hog’s hair at least every other day, if not daily.

“If we’re going to clip the hair off why is it necessary to continually brush? To establish a growth pattern during the growing phase,” he says.

A lot of people claim that with soundness, body condition, feet and legs and the ability to move being highly prioritized in a champion hog, hair doesn’t matter. Phillips disagrees.

“I always tell kids that the grand barrow has to take a pretty picture,” he says.

A proper clipping job gives a little more “pop” in the animal’s muscle tone. And, he asks, after spending so much time caring for an animal, why make it look any less than its best on show day?

“When it comes down to it, it’s the smallest of details that not only separate first from second, but also fifth from sixth,” he says. “And at a major show, that can make the difference in a hog making the sale or not, which can be a difference of \$1,000.”

And while aiming to be competitive yet economically feasible in his FFA program, that’s a big deal, Phillips says.

## *clipping snip-by-snip*

After months of work with a hog, with show time rapidly approaching, Phillips assists and advises exhibitors on how to showcase all of the work they’ve put in to their project.

“Clipping hogs isn’t necessarily hard, but at the same time there is some special

care that goes into it,” he says. “It can be detrimental to take the hair down too close to a pig’s skin.”

Ideally, every hog gets clipped the day before arriving at a show, or even the night before show day.

Much effort goes into keeping hair laid down and as shiny as possible to achieve the ideal show-ring look, according to Phillips.

Especially when kids clip their own pigs, he recommends starting off long and knowing you can always go shorter. If you leave a conservative amount of hair, you can always evaluate what the other hogs look like once you arrive at the show.

It may not seem like 1/8 inch of hair makes much of a difference, but it can really define muscle shape, according to Phillips. But, you must analyze your hog.

“If you have a barrow that has a deep, grooved top and is too hard, and you take all that hair down, it intensifies the muscle shape, but it also intensifies and that he probably needs to have more fat on him. On the opposite end, if you take a barrow that’s too fat and leave too much hair on, he’ll look too soft,” he says.

It depends on the barrow and on the breed, when determining how short or long to clip.

“With Durocs, you can take more off, because they don’t have as much true natural shape as compared to crossbreds,” Phillips says. “We try to keep a little more hair on crossbreds just to give a little softer look all the way through.”

Phillips also emphasizes that good



clippers are a “must” to achieve a flawless cut.

The first clipping is the only one true haircut that will give the hog its best hair, so this is not the place to skimp, he says. While there are many that do a good job, he recommends the newest clippers that are quiet.

“When cutting around the head and throat, if your clippers are loud and vibrate, it can spook the pig,” he says.

Even more important than the kind of clippers you use is the condition of the blades.

“You can have the best clippers in the world, but if the blades are dull, it’s not going to do you any good,” he says.

For his own daughter and FFA kids, Phillips generally uses a 1 or a 1A attachment to go against the hog’s hair. Very rarely does he remove the butch comb, because especially if a pig would spook or move, freehanding could really mess one up. The guard serves as a safeguard.

And don’t just stop with the body – from the neck forward matters, too. When it comes to the little details that make a winner, a hog needs to look good from his entire profile, he says. He recommends taking the hair on the head down just a bit farther than on the pig’s body.

Although the emphasis is on presenting

every hog at its best in Phillips’ FFA program, the motivation for doing so is more than on a surface level.

### *showing is a passion*

Phillips grew up on a purebred Chester White operation and now raises Durocs and crossbreds with his wife on their farm.

“It’s a second job – it’s a strong passion for putting out quality animals where kids can excel at shows with them,” he says.

In his teaching role, he strives to instill that same love for hogs in the next generation. Previously, he worked as a county Extension agent, but says he moved to teaching and advising the FFA chapter because he gets to spend more time with his students.

“Having the opportunity to talk to them every day allows me to develop a closer relationship and be able to help them,” Phillips says.

Phillips is fulfilling a purpose in helping others, and that’s what showing livestock is all about to him. His students learn responsibility and earn a sense of accomplishment every year by raising and taking care of an animal.

Learning to properly clip and showcase that animal at its best is just the icing on the cake. It’s what can take a young showman all the way to the winner’s circle.



## CLIPPING SECRETS FROM THE EXPERT:

To keep a pig calm, clip while he’s eating. It may take a little bit more time, but Phillips never snouts pigs because it alters the ability to be successfully clipped. Snouthng can often change the perception of their soundness.

It can be a little frustrating, though, because the barrows don’t always just stand there and eat.

“I would suggest if a barrow’s not cooperating, put him back in his pen and get him out again in a couple of hours to reclip,” he says. “You have to be patient when clipping.”

Phillips tells the story of a dad who became impatient and snouted an animal up.

“I walked in, and he smiled and said ‘Hey, I told you it would work,’” he recalls. “We unsnouted him, and he was too tight to ever show again.”

The time and effort pay off, though.

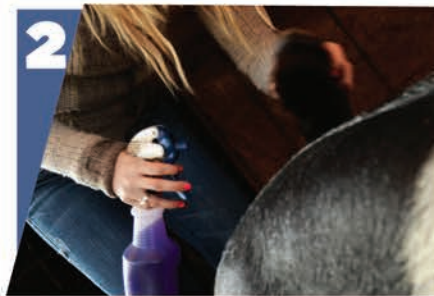
“You work with an animal for four months,” Phillips says. “There’s no sense in ruining one overnight.”

## it's easy as 1, 2, 3

Preparation for any show begins long before show day. Phillips says preparing a hog for the big day comes down to 3 fundamentals: keeping the hogs flexible, maintaining a good hair coat and properly clipping the hog.



Exercising your hog is critical in preparing it for the showing. Getting your hog out of the pen and moving enhances the hog’s mobility and flexibility by keeping joints loose and preparing it for long driving periods in the showing.



A good skin and hair coat can go a long way in the showing. Phillips says, “Champions have to look pretty.” Brushing your hog and using a light conditioner at least every other day encourages good hair growth while moisturizing the skin.



“Clipping isn’t hard, but at the same time there is special care that goes into it,” Phillips says. Knowing your hog, having a good set of clippers and a sharp set of clipper blades are all factors that are important when clipping your hog.