



JUDGING IS JUST THAT, ONE MAN'S OR WOMAN'S OPINION!

If you check your thesaurus, it will tell you that a judge is a moderator, a referee, an umpire, an authority, a connoisseur, an assessor and one that gives a decision or opinion. Each of those definitions make sense to me both as an experienced livestock judge and as one who observes many livestock judges over the course of a year. For those who have not had the experience of judging a livestock show and rendering both your opinions and justifications to a group of fellow livestock enthusiasts and experts, I can safely say that it is not for everyone. If you do it for the money, you will starve. If you do it for the praise and admiration of your peers, you will ultimately become cynical and disappointed. But, if you do it for the love of the business, or because you respect the integrity of youth development programs built around livestock and or believe that what you do just might help in a small way with the improvement of livestock, you have a better than average chance to enjoy what you do and do something good at the same time.

Lately, it seems that livestock exhibition and judging have fallen on harder times. The uncontrolled desire to win at all costs, the dark and long running tradition of misrepresentation of livestock either genetically, physically or chronologically, the pressure to select animals with traits that are right at the edge of ridiculous in terms of form and function and the political ugliness that permeates parts of the judging fraternity has brought the reputation and future of livestock exhibition and evaluation to the breaking point. Let me make one thing very clear. I truly love being part of the great tradition of livestock exhibition and judging livestock shows! I grew up idolizing the great stockmen and the respected livestock evaluators that brought years of experience and common wisdom with them when they entered the ring. Most were highly respected, sincere folks and their opinions were anticipated because of their years of service and the way they protected the integrity of the event. A judge could put you first or last, could compliment or criticize, could chose animals based on whatever criteria they saw fit, because they were respected producers and educators. Even when disappointed by the outcome, almost all exhibitors would shake the judge's hand to thank him or her for sharing their time and wisdom. Competitors would then return home and work harder so that next time the results might be better. You reflected with others on what the judge had to say, kept the good, forgot about the unimportant and tried to breed better livestock. I understand, no one really likes to lose. This is a society that embraces winners. The mistake we make as exhibitors is giving others the higher power to pass judgment on the sum of our efforts or somehow decide whether we are or are not a winner. If we don't enter the ring with a confidence as to the extent of our efforts and a pride in what has already been achieved then we have only a slim hope of having a satisfying experience in the show ring. Take pride in accomplishment because you are or are not a winner long before the show judge renders his or her decision.

It seems today many have forgotten the good in this system. Many young people miss out on the important experience of learning and working with their livestock and thus lose much of the value and pride in the effort offered by youth livestock programs. No favor is done for a young person who achieves without effort. Success without commitment or by shortcut is an unhealthy life lesson that can be hard to unlearn. All of us have seen t-shirts around the ring with statements like "Second place is just the first one of the losers." Too often we see open, unchecked disrespect for the folks officiating the event even from those who have barely earned the right to address them as anything but sir. Slowly, participation in livestock shows seems on the decline. Certainly, runaway costs are partially to blame but too often it's because of the



perception of impropriety among exhibitors in an attempt to win and or collusion between exhibitors and unscrupulous judges predetermining the day's outcomes. Of course there is a duty for show officials and association staff to help minimize obvious misrepresentation or unfair situations, and yet that often places them in a precarious predicament as they strive to promote future participation, maintain relationships let alone risk the legal repercussions that can result from false accusation and or action.

What then is the answer to returning the high reputation and standing of livestock exhibition and evaluation? I believe respect, integrity and self policing are keys to moving forward. There is absolutely no excuse, no value and no redemption for those who tarnish the long tradition of showing livestock by doing anything other than fairly and honestly evaluating the livestock without regard to ownership, historical relationship or prejudice toward exhibitor. Some judges actually brag about their lack of ethics or attempt to justify it in public by claiming it is necessary for them in order to judge more and larger livestock events. No wonder many exhibitors become so skeptical of show outcomes as to question their investment in future competition.

Exhibitors too must clean their own houses. The use of illegal drugs on livestock, inhumane practices such as cosmetic surgeries and the injection of air or other substances under the skin of livestock need to stop. If you can justify these practices to your kids, or find some pathetic sense of pride in misrepresentation then you are of a different fabric than most quality livestock people. There is pride and a sense of accomplishment in winning the way we were all taught to win, by earning it. Great genetics, hard work and talent need to be rewarded and not devalued by those who choose to disrespect themselves and the game. Even the photographic misrepresentation of livestock tarnishes the reputation and reduces the value of livestock evaluation.

Ultimately, those folks who are given the privilege of officiating these traditional events have a great responsibility as well. Taking the title of judge to heart and respecting the honor it is the first step. **Most judges do this and they are deserving of all of our respect for their efforts.** Use your experience and your position to do the right thing more often. Just by selecting for ideals instead of impractical extremes reduces the effectiveness of misrepresentation. Secondly, those exhibitors who want these events to continue, grow, and prosper need to step to the plate, do the right thing and compete with a love and pride for the history and tradition of livestock evaluation and competition. I know, it seems idealistic and perhaps even corny to ask for, but no amount of show rules or witch hunts can have the effect that self policing could render. Consider the youth development part of this business and realize that the privilege of young people showing livestock could literally come to an end if state legislatures and corporate sponsors were confronted with the negative publicity that many relatively common performance enhancing practices would bring if brought to the public. Youth livestock programs are already in jeopardy in some areas brought about by program budget cuts, increased costs and our changing society. As for open shows, just quit the nonsense! It can't feel that good to breed or buy an average one then win by deceit. Win or lose with dignity, have pride in your accomplishments great and small. Respect the show, respect the officials, respect the tradition, respect each other and by doing so, prove yourself worthy of the respect you seek as a breeder, an exhibitor and a stockman.