

# Game Face



PHOTO BY CHRISTY COUCH LEE

## **Grand champion senior showman Matt Johnson is serious about showing and the Hereford breed.**

by **Allison Fortner**

The pressure built as judges strolled past the fitting chutes in the showing, meticulously observing the top 10 senior Hereford exhibitors in the country, but Matt Johnson was wearing his game face.

With a stony gaze filled with confidence and determination, Matt fit his heifer, putting to use the knowledge he has been building since first stepping into the showing at age 7.

Now 21 years old, Matt counted down the 45 minutes designated for fitting, carefully keeping time on his wristwatch. “Five minutes for each leg, five minutes on top, five minutes on the belly, five minutes on each of the sides, five minutes at the end to finish up...and walk her out in the ring.”

However, walking out into the ring did not signal the end of the intense competition that warm June 30 afternoon. Exhibitors led their cattle into position and waited for results. The four judges observed,

consulted in hushed tones and filled in the score sheets holding the answers that exhibitors and the audience were anxiously waiting to hear.

After a half hour of exhibitors standing nervously in the ring with showsticks in hand, the judges passed the sheets to the stage for scoring. Final numbers were added, and judge Jara Settles began to give closing comments.

One by one judges congratulated the finalists, from 10th place to third. The tension and anticipation in the Five Points Bank Arena finally climaxed when Jara slapped Matt’s heifer and shook his hand, congratulating him as the grand champion senior showman.

Matt’s self-described “death glare” broke, and he allowed his emotions to show for the first time in more than an hour and a half. A huge grin broke on his face and a wave of emotion overcame him as he realized he had finally accomplished his long-set goal.

Clapping, cheers and congratulations rang out across the arena for Matt as he met his mother in a celebratory embrace at the edge of the showing, which is not surprising, considering Matt’s love for the Hereford breed is rooted in his family.

A fourth-generation Johnson Farms Hereford breeder from Cambridge, Ill., Matt has always been passionate about the breed and the people of the Hereford industry. He’s no rookie to the Hereford or exhibitor game.



Showmanship judge Jara Settles selects Matt as grand champion senior showman.



In celebration of his victory at the edge of the showing, Matt hugs his mother, Kathy.

“Honestly,” he confesses, when asked about how he prepared for the 2015 Junior National Hereford Expo (JNHE), “I’ve been preparing my whole life.”

### Family influence

His sister, Jill, began showing when she was eligible, and Matt soon followed, even before he was old enough to be a member of the National Junior Hereford Association (NJHA).

“My dad got me a heifer anyway,” Matt recalls, “because I didn’t like just tagging along. I wanted to be involved.” He showed in open shows before becoming a member of the NJHA and the Illinois Junior Hereford Association, as he has been for the past 13 years.

However, Matt is not afraid to acknowledge that his showmanship career did not begin with a winning streak. “From a young age, I didn’t have the most success,” Matt admits, “but along the way, I was doing my own work. I feel that I learned a lot from it and it actually made me a more talented individual today.”

Matt attributes his success in recent years to commitment and a work ethic that he learned from his father, Royce Johnson. “I would say he’s the one that really instilled a very hard work ethic in me from a young age,” says Matt, naming his father as one of his role models.

### Full schedule

Matt’s work ethic is evident in the fact that he stays busy helping manage the herd at Johnson Farms while also juggling academics. He is beginning his senior year at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign (UIUC), where he is a crop science major with a concentration in crop agribusiness.

Matt serves as the historian for the alpha chapter of Alpha Gamma Rho fraternity and the president of the campus Hoof & Horn Club, while maintaining a small grains research position on the campus farms.



Hereford Herdsmen of the Year, Tammy and Tom Boatman, who helped select the champion senior showman, speak with Matt during the suspenseful senior showmanship finals.

With a life full of commitments, Matt is grateful for his mother, Kathy Johnson, and the support she has given him in all of his endeavors, especially in the past year.

Before attending UIUC, Matt earned his associate degree in agricultural science from Black Hawk College East Campus, a school located close to home. Transferring colleges in August 2014 meant managing his show heifer when he came home on weekends and relying on his mother for help throughout the week.

Matt credits his mother with being a tremendous help to him, no matter the circumstances. Kathy was happy to help and couldn’t be more proud of her son and his JNHE accomplishments.

“He’s going out really good in his last year showing,” Kathy beams. “We’re still smiling. I think we’re going to smile a long time over this one.”

Kathy is also thankful for the way showing provided an opportunity for her family to work together and to develop strong friendships within the Hereford community.

### The people

With resilient bonds formed in the barns, it isn’t surprising that Matt’s favorite aspect of



It’s all business waiting for results in the last moments of the showmanship finals.

showing is the people. Matt values the friendships he has made over the years with people from across Illinois and the U.S. and looked forward to catching up with those people during JNHE.

The relationships formed are valuable, and Matt is thankful to the breeders who have given him the opportunity to help them over the years. “Having someone trust you to work on their livestock is huge,” he says, “and that has made me a much better all-around cattleman.”

During the past four years, Matt has worked closely with Kyle and Jodi McMillan and their daughter, Lauren, of Rustic Oaks Farm, both at their



Matt puts the finishing touches on one of his heifer’s legs during the fitting portion of the showmanship finals.



Matt works with the younger members of his first-place team during the Sullivan Supply and Stock Show University fitting contest.

ranch and while traveling to shows.

“Matt sets himself apart by focusing on the task at hand and doing it almost to a degree of perfection,” says Kyle, who counts working with Matt as a pleasure and a blessing.

However, Matt’s admirable qualities reach beyond his dedication to working with show cattle. “One of the other things that sets Matt apart is his strength of character,” Kyle adds. “He is always trying to do the right thing, and in this day in age, that’s not always the case with young people.”

The McMillans consider him a part of the family, and Matt is grateful for the doors they have opened for him and considers Kyle one of his foremost mentors.

In addition to passing on knowledge about feeding show cattle, Kyle has taught Matt numerous small details. “If someone is able to show you the small details that can set you apart from the competition, that’s what really makes or breaks showing livestock,” says Matt.

### Preparing for JNHE

Determined to make it showing livestock, Matt traveled with the McMillans to the 2015 JNHE with four goals in mind. He aspired to have a spot in the top 10 in senior showmanship, to succeed in the team fitting contest, to win a division in the bred-and-owned heifer show and to have the heifer with the best hair in the barn. Matt’s success certainly reached beyond his showmanship achievement.

Besides his victory in senior showmanship, Matt was the senior member of the Illinois Supply and Stock Show University fitting contest, in which he and his fellow team members took home first place.

While he did not receive a division banner, Matt’s heifer won Class 49 in the bred-and-owned show, and he was happy with her overall placement in a tough division.

Finally, Matt put in hours of time and effort into his hair care management program and laughs, “It’s hard to measure if I had the hairiest heifer. There are a lot of hairy ones in there, but I feel that mine is up there at the top of that list.”

During the showmanship competition, judges noticed and commented on his heifer’s excellent hair. When prompted for his hair tricks, Matt says he may have a few secrets, but the key is dedication to working at it every day.

While he has his own specially mixed recipes for hair care products, his favorite tools are a garden hose and a brush. “All you need is water and a lot of brushing,” teaches Matt, encouraging other exhibitors to maintain their cattle’s hair daily at home.

There is no doubt that this attention to detail gave him an advantage in the showmanship competition. “I know showmanship is about showing the calf, but having a very well-presented animal can put you ahead of the rest sometimes,” he explains in regards to his laborious hair growing efforts.

### Advice for exhibitors

But hair care advice is not all of the wisdom Matt wishes to pass on to younger exhibitors. He reminds them to stay calm and collected while in the showring and to avoid all distractions. “It’s you, your animal

and the judge,” he puts simply. “Go out there and get in the zone.”

However, Matt emphasizes that showmanship starts at home with practice. Instead of showing up and expecting showmanship to go well, Matt says it is imperative to work with a calf enough to walk her into position without using the stick.

Finally, he encourages exhibitors to glean from the expertise of those around them. “That’s what I feel has helped me out the most,” Matt reflects, “surrounding myself with people I trust and people I can learn from and just watching, learning, asking questions and practicing at home.”

On any given show day, Matt can be found in the barn picking up fitting jobs and working with the kids around him, trying to pass on his knowledge and to aid them in success.

Noah Benedict, Dewey, Ill., has known Matt for four years and not only has learned fitting and hair care techniques from him but has also benefited from his leadership skills. “I admire his willingness to be a role model, set the tone and lead by example,” Noah says.

### Looking forward

While this was Matt’s fourth and final JNHE as an exhibitor, he knows it won’t be his last in attendance.

“I’ve had people that have taught me a lot over the years and I try to pass that on to the younger ones as much as I can to try and make them be the best they can be.”

Matt doesn’t plan on leaving the Hereford business either. He plans to have a herd of Hereford cattle for the rest of his life as he takes over the herd at home.

“Someday, if I have children, I want them to have the same opportunities I did and be able to exhibit Hereford cattle at the national level if they’re interested,” says Matt.

No longer wearing his game face, Matt smiles with eagerness to see where his passion for the Hereford industry will take him and how he can help others along the way. **HW**