



Setting the Stage

The cattle feeding industry is another outlet for juniors to achieve success.

by *Diane Meyer*

A pair of junior Hereford breeders each took a deep breath as they made their way to the front of a room filled with seasoned cattlemen. They smiled as their minds raced in anticipation of delivering a speech to the industry leaders before them. When they elected to participate in the inaugural National Junior Hereford Association (NJHA) Fed Steer Shootout nearly a year ago, neither Molly Biggs, Dixon, Ill., nor Trevor Johnson, Centerville, S.D., could

have imagined they would be standing where they were now — alongside Gregory Feedlots Manager David Trowbridge at the American Hereford Association (AHA) Annual Meeting in Kansas City, Mo.

After Trey Befort, AHA director of commercial programs, and Trowbridge shared the success of the 2017 shootout, Molly and Trevor made their way to the podium to deliver well-rehearsed descriptions of their own experience with the program.

Taking aim

With encouragement from their parents, the two active NJHA members decided to compete in the shootout program, along with 27 other Hereford youth from 10 states.

“It was another opportunity for us juniors to get involved and find success,” Molly says of her decision. “The first benefit of the program that came to my mind was not having to feed [steers] out all winter. But as we got further into it, there were a lot more opportunities that arose.”

Her realization was the precise intention of the shootout — to cultivate an understanding of the



The Fed Steer Shootout provides an opportunity for youth to experience the commercial side of the industry.

cattle industry that extends beyond the showring. This program provides NJHA members the opportunity to obtain real-world experience in the commercial cattle feeding sector by collecting and comparing feedlot performance data with actual carcass performance data received upon harvest.

Just days into 2017, 72 calves were delivered to Gregory Feedlots in Tabor, Iowa. After a roughly 30-day “warm-up” period, calves received ear tags and implants, and ultrasound measurements were taken. These tools were used to provide periodic updates on individual animal performance.

In May, participants sat in on four webinars which covered topics from rations, ultrasound scans, expected progeny differences (EPDs) and profit indexes. The following month, the group had the opportunity to tour Gregory Feedlots and the Greater Omaha packing facility.

“Going to Greater Omaha was a highlight of the whole experience for me,” Molly says. “I want to go back because you can’t take it all in the first time. They’re always improving stuff there.”

Both the Biggs and Johnson families note the impressive efficiency of which the packing plant operates. An entire carcass is rapidly processed into retail-ready cuts in a matter of three brief minutes. Cleanliness and food safety procedures were followed with finesse, a fact which Molly uses to advocate for the industry back home.

“In school there’s a lot of lifestyle trends people are following, like being vegan,” she explains. “People like to say certain things we do are harming animals. When you see what they do at Greater Omaha, it helps you explain to them, ‘no, that isn’t what happens. It’s actually really clean and safe.’”

Adjusting their sights

Getting a behind-the-scenes look at a feedlot and packing plant was just the tip of the iceberg when it came to learning about the fed cattle industry. The first year was a learning curve to say the least, especially when it came to data mining. “We all believe we’re raising a great product, but we don’t know if we’re raising a great product,” acknowledges Molly’s father, David Biggs.

“Until you get that data back,” contends Marianne Biggs, Molly’s mother.

With numerous different points of information obtained from each calf, participants saw how



Pictured front row (l to r): Molly Biggs and Mackenzie Trowbridge visit the Greater Omaha packing plant as part of the Fed Steer Shootout program. David Trowbridge (back, right) also led the girls on a tour of Gregory Feedlots.

the growth of their animal changed during the animal’s lifetime, and how that growth corresponded with ultrasound information.

“The first year was a big eye-opener on herd health,” says Mark Johnson, Trevor’s father. The amount of times calves were treated in the feedlot directly correlated with their overall performance and quality grade. “Even if you’re just planning on selling feeder cattle, they have to managed to meet the needs of the next owner,” Mark notes.

Visually analyzing performance data has inspired both the Johnson and Biggs families to place a higher emphasis on bull selection in the future. The Biggs’ now set their sights on AI (artificial insemination) bulls that offer a positive marbling EPD. “We’re not buying semen on any bulls that don’t have that,” David says. Molly nods in agreement, “We didn’t really focus on that before.”

The webinars also provided valuable information on how to utilize data in selecting ideal bulls. Mark points to a lesson provided by Shane Bedwell,

continued on page 34...



The American Hereford Association has partnered with Gregory Feedlots to collect data on steers youth delivered as part of the Fed Steer Shootout program.

AHA chief operating officer and director of breed improvement, in which he explains how the Certified Hereford Beef Index (CHB\$) incorporates various carcass traits, such as carcass weight, Dry Matter Intake, fat, ribeye area and marbling, into a single index.

“All of us, including the boys, learned more about the CHB\$ numbers,” Mark says. “We’ll probably take a harder look at the bulls we’re using in that way. Not as a sole criteria, but if we find three bulls we like, we will look at their harvest numbers or CHB\$ value.”

Another quality of noted economic importance is disposition. The Biggs had a calf that was restless from the start, and after seeing the data, recognized that animal as their least profitable. “He never slowed down to eat, or if he did eat, then he ran around the pen. That’s the calf we got the \$50 profit off of — so disposition matters, too,” David explains.

Beyond the bullseye

Although the shootout program taught participants the ins and outs of the commercial industry, the lessons learned can prove useful in a number of capacities outside of the feedlot.

“I have been to Faces of Leadership and have done the Fed Steer Shootout, and they all tie together,” Trevor says. “[The AHA] finds ways to make them interactive. That is something the Hereford Association has done well.”

Trevor has always wanted to be involved in the fed cattle industry, and the shootout program has been a “stepping stone” in preparing him for a future in that capacity. Likewise, his younger brother Tate, has set his sights on raising a black baldy herd. The shootout program has exposed them to numerous careers available to them in the commercial sector, and the Faces of Leadership conference has complemented the

program by showing youth ways to get involved at the collegiate level. The combination of the two programs means the Johnsons can look beyond the scope of just applying to colleges — they can also make an informed decision on choosing a major to best serve their future career goals.

“Our own operation is a first-generation farm, which is kind of unique,” Mark says. “With a few kids that are just a few years from graduating, if we want to get bigger and try to bring a son home — or both of them home — we need to look at some things that we can do, like maybe feeding more commercial cows. As parents, that’s something we’re looking at.”

Molly also applauds the program for opening doors to degree and career options she did not know existed, such as the meat marketing segment of the industry.

“The best part about this program is the opportunities that come from it, especially when it comes to jobs,” Molly says. “Going out to Tabor and seeing Gregory Feedlots, going to Greater Omaha, and meeting Trey, Shane and other industry leaders in Kansas City opens up a lot of doors that no other program in the association really gives you.”

As parents, David and Marianne were thrilled to bring Molly to the Annual Meeting, where she could interact with the most proactive breeders and juniors in the industry.

“You can’t make your world too big,” David says. “She’s met people that definitely can help her in the future, whether it’s signing a letter of recommendation or helping her get an internship.”

“Everything in this youth program is about meeting people,” he adds. “We’re learning a lot about feeding cattle and everything, but she’s been exposed to a whole other group of people.”

The payout

For a second time that day, Molly and Trevor found themselves eager with anticipation. On Friday evening during the Hereford Honorees Program, the winners of the 2017 Fed Steer Shootout were set to be announced for the first time. Trevor and Tate won the highest marbling score with their commercial steer, while Molly was named the 2017 Fed Steer Shootout Junior of the Year.

“I guess afterwards was the fun part because everyone was coming up to me and commenting, and I just got to meet a lot of different people,” Molly describes.

Molly and Trevor will soon be heading to college, a milestone they feel much more prepared for thanks to the Fed Steer Shootout Program.

“As juniors, we can only show cattle until we are 21, but we can raise them our whole life,” Molly reflects. “Not everything can be a show heifer or a show steer. Even if you’re not successful in it, you’re still going to learn something from it. This opens up your future.”

Editor’s Note: For information and to enter the 2019 contest, visit Hereford.org/youth/njha-fed-steer-shootout/.

Seventy-one Breeders Show Their Commitment to Breed Improvement

The American Hereford Association would like to extend a big thank you to all of the breeders who have participated in the Whole Cow Herd DNA project. Your passion for this breed and its future is remarkable. Your efforts have further validated the commitment you have for continued breed improvement. It's also obvious you found value in obtaining this critical female data to advance your genetics and the breed. We appreciate your time and leadership in this project.

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