

Lincoln/East Adams County Weekly 4-H Article



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Article VI

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Market Lamb Showmanship (Part I)

Introduction

Showmanship may be the single most important quality necessary for success in the animal show ring. A lamb showman is responsible for presenting his/her lamb in a manner that promotes the animal's strengths and de-emphasizes its weaknesses. Concentrating on the development of proper showmanship skills will improve your chance of success. The combination of a high quality showman and a high-quality lamb makes a very competitive team. Some youth have a natural talent for showing animals while others must develop the skill of showing livestock. Showmanship is not learned or developed overnight. Hard work goes into becoming an experienced showman. Time must be spent with a lamb at home, months before the show, to properly train the animal to lead and brace. Showmanship should be fun and exciting for exhibitors. This is **your** opportunity to do everything possible to make your lamb look its best. A great lamb showman is always aware of everything surrounding and involving the person/lamb team. The showman maintains awareness of him/herself, the lamb, the judge, ring steward(s), other showmen, other lambs, and areas in and outside the show ring. Performing at the highest level every time you enter the ring as a showman will allow everything else to fall into place.



Animal Selection

One of the key ingredients for successful showmanship is to select a good animal, free from structural defects and will have the potential to be competitive. While any animal may be shown, remember that it is always easier to show a high-quality animal free of major faults as opposed to showing one that has major quality issues. Most showmen will find that it is much more gratifying to show a lamb that is "a good one" rather than one that is, well, "not so good"!

Halter-breaking

The real work of showmanship begins once lambs have been selected and placed on feed. Begin training lambs by teaching them to lead with a halter. Halters are available on the

commercial market, but they can be handmade using 3/8-inch cotton or nylon rope. For the animal's safety and comfort, make sure the lead rope slides easily through both sides of the nose piece. Halters are designed to fit only one correct way on the lamb's head. Put the halter on the lamb correctly at each training session.

The piece of the halter running across the animal's nose is not adjustable. The nose piece is used only to hold the halter in proper position. Pressure comes from the portion of the halter leaving the left side of the lamb's jaw, running below and behind the lamb's ears around the head, and back under its muzzle on the right side returning to the left side of the jaw. The halter applies pressure to the back of the head, encouraging the animal to move forward. At the same time, pressure is applied under the muzzle, encouraging the lamb to keep its head held high. Lambs often fight the halter at first, but will soon adjust to the restraint. Tie lambs to a fence with their heads held above their shoulders. This way, they begin to learn how to hold their heads up in the show ring. As lambs grow accustomed to the halter, tie them a little higher in each training session until they appear as if they are standing at attention. Do not tie a lamb so high that he is forced to hold his nose pointing upward. This is uncomfortable for the lamb and does not teach him anything. Allow a small amount of slack in the lead rope so the lamb can stand with his head parallel to the ground without any pressure under his muzzle. However, never allow enough slack in the rope that the animal will put its head down or get its foot over the lead rope and become entangled. Always tie animals using a slip-knot. This knot will allow for an easy, quick release for the showman or if the animal is in danger. **Never** leave tied lambs unattended. Lambs should be haltered and tied daily – or as often as possible – for a minimum of 20 minutes each training session.

If an exhibitor has several lambs, practice leading and bracing each individual lamb for 15 minutes while leaving the others tied. After an individual training session is completed, re-tie that lamb and work another until all lambs have been trained to lead and brace. Recognize that this schedule is the bare minimum. Be aware of weather conditions and adjust your training sessions accordingly. During hot weather, work lambs early in the morning or late in the evening to avoid heat stress. The more time you spend training lambs, the more successful your experience will be when you and the lambs enter the show ring. Continued work with each lamb is critical. Spend time teaching the animal to lead using the halter and eventually to lead without the halter.

At first, lambs will resist the halter by pulling backward, lying down, or trying to run away. **Be patient.** Pull the lamb forward with steady pressure, and when it takes a step or two forward, immediately give it slack in the lead rope. The lamb might need to be encouraged to move forward by applying slight pressure to the dock. Eventually the animal will rarely pull backward and will lead easily along the showman's right side as the halter is held from the animal's left side. At this point, lambs are ready to start leading without the halter. Showmen may leave the halter on the lamb as a security measure, but their left hand should be placed under the lamb's muzzle and the right hand behind the lamb's head below his ears. Lambs recognize pressure applied by the showman's hands as it mimics the pressure of the halter. When lambs lead with ease, halters will no longer be necessary. Begin practicing leading lambs from their right side.

Though the halter places the showman on the left side of the animal – most commonly considered the show side – a situation could arise in the show ring that will require leading the lamb from its right side. A good showman must be prepared, so lambs should lead easily from both sides.



Positioning the lamb's feet

When teaching lambs to lead, stop them occasionally and set their feet in the correct position. Lambs will quickly learn to correctly place their feet each time they stop. A lamb's feet should be placed on the four corners of its body, and the lamb should not stand too wide nor too narrow on either the front or back legs. On the profile, lambs should not have their hind legs pulled forward too far underneath them nor stretched backward too far behind them.

Correct foot placement can make a huge difference in the animal's appearance, so it is extremely important to devote a good portion of training time to establishing correct foot placement.

Next Week: Bracing your lamb

Credit:

Brian R. Faris, *Market Lamb Showmanship from Start to Finish*, Kansas State University, July 2008.

Additional resources related to 4-H Sheep Projects:

<https://pubs.wsu.edu/ListItems.aspx?CategoryID=288>

<http://www.4-hmall.org/Category/sheep.aspx>

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