

8-1-2016

## Livestock Judges Training Provides Hands-On Experience

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### Recommended Citation

Nash, S., Harrison, S., Packham, J., & Sanchez, D. (2016). Livestock Judges Training Provides Hands-On Experience. *Journal of Extension*, 54(4), Article 12. <https://tigerprints.clemson.edu/joe/vol54/iss4/12>

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## **Livestock Judges Training Provides Hands-On Experience**

### **Abstract**

The judging of a market animal at a fair is the highlight of a youth-owned livestock project. Livestock judges are hired to evaluate youth projects at fairs. They are critical ambassadors for agriculture and influence countless youths and adults. Judges must be knowledgeable about current animal evaluation methods that support youth development. The circle of knowledgeable individuals qualified to evaluate animal projects is limited in the Intermountain West, making it difficult to find skilled judges. This necessitates hiring unqualified or untrained judges, limiting the educational experiences for participating youths. The Intermountain Livestock Judges Training was developed to train and update youth livestock judges.

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## **Introduction**

Adults are hired to evaluate youth-owned livestock projects at fairs by applying accepted animal industry standards. These judges are critical ambassadors for agriculture, and because they evaluate youth-owned livestock, they have the opportunity to influence countless volunteer leaders and youths. Judges must be knowledgeable about current animal evaluation methods that support the mission of youth development. According to Sawyer (1987), a judge can affect a 4-H member's attitude about a year-long learning experience or influence the direction of an entire program.

Extension personnel face challenges brought on by small numbers of qualified judges and limited budgets for hiring judges and, in some cases, have no choice but to hire unqualified judges. These situations limit the educational opportunities for youths at livestock shows. Brady, Griffin, and Kline (2003) determined that training horse show judges adequately in the areas of working with youth and judging and placing horses is an important part of creating a positive learning experience for 4-H members. Nash and Sant (2005) found that "livestock judging gives one the ability to analyze and organize thoughts quickly and logically" (Results section, para. 7),

and McCann (1998) determined that judging participants learn to evaluate the desirable and undesirable points of conformation in a class of animals. These findings indicate that valuable skills are associated with judging livestock shows.

A study of Indiana 4-H youths who had livestock animal projects revealed that raising livestock taught responsibility, commitment, increased self-confidence, people skills, decision-making skills, problem-solving skills, and the ability to work well with others (Rusk, Summerlot-Early, Machtmes, Talbert, & Balschweid, 2003). Another study (Sawer, 1987) determined that the most important role a judge plays is that of teacher. Because youths are gaining an increase in life skills by participating in the livestock project and judges have the opportunity to work closely with these youths when evaluating the project animal, these studies support the importance of training judges to understand the mission of youth development as it relates to evaluating youth livestock animal projects.

The challenges faced by a group of Extension faculty from Utah, Idaho, Colorado, Montana, and Wyoming in finding qualified livestock judges spurred the development of the Intermountain Livestock Judges Training. A search for training material to help develop livestock judges revealed that such materials were not available. A training program was developed to provide potential adult livestock judges with current meat-animal industry guidelines and up-to-date animal evaluation methods that support the mission of youth development.

The following training goals were developed to help drive the training: (a) teach participants the mission, role, and responsibility of being a judge at youth livestock shows; (b) increase participants' selection and judging abilities and the skills they need to train other livestock judges; (c) increase participants' knowledge of terminology related to youth livestock shows; and (d) teach participants how to interact with youths and parents to make the show-ring experience an educational and logical event.

Reaching these goals is critical to the training process. According to Eversole (1990), "livestock judging participants are provided the opportunity to expand their critical thinking, decision-making and communication skills" (Conclusion section, para. 1).

## **Materials and Methods**

In 2004, Extension team members traveled to the initial training location for a face-to-face meeting to plan the training and view the training location facilities. For trainings that have occurred since that time, the local host has had the responsibility of facility arrangement, and team members meet via four conference calls during the year to plan the training program and identify presenters. Presenters are carefully selected and are asked to demonstrate current livestock evaluation standards and explain how to work with youths in the show-ring and how to announce placement of animals to the audience using proper terminology.

From 2004 to 2015, 10 trainings were held; they occurred in Utah, Idaho, Colorado, Montana, and Wyoming. Industry and university experts from 11 states have taught participants about current livestock evaluation techniques. Having at least two presenters at each training provided for a variety of educational opportunities. The trainings were typically held at a location where animals were readily accessible for judging and near a harvest facility so that carcass evaluation could be incorporated as a teaching tool.

The training is a 3-day, 2-night event. On day 1, participants have the opportunity to evaluate one class of four animals of beef, sheep, swine, and meat goats. The animals are harvested, and on day 3 of the training, the carcasses are viewed hanging in the cooler. On day 2 of the training, participants conduct hands-on animal

evaluation of all four species. Market and breeding animals of each species as well as showmanship classes are evaluated. Allowing for reflection and review, classroom discussions are an important component of the training. Participants mark a judging card for each class judged, providing the opportunity for everyone to make a decision. All classes are part of a livestock-judging contest, with awards being presented at the closing session. During the judging of classes, participants are given the opportunity to speak in front of the group to share how and why they placed animals the way they did. Participants are able to receive immediate feedback from the discussion leader. The training program also includes a teen track; in addition to gaining livestock evaluation skills, youths in the teen track work with a presenter to learn proper animal description terms and an acceptable oral reasons format. The training concludes with a session that brings presenters together, allowing participants to ask questions and hear final thoughts from the experts. Meals and breaks are included in the registration.

An institutional review board–approved survey was conducted in 2012 to determine the impact of the trainings on all participants who had attended since 2004. The evaluation instrument used a 5-point scale to allow participants to respond to how influential the training was in reaching program goals. The survey was mailed to all past training participants, and a follow-up postcard was sent 3 weeks later. Of 128 surveys sent, 77 were completed, for a response rate of 60%. The data collected were in quantitative and qualitative forms. Of the 77 respondents, 46 had attended two or more trainings.

## Results

The survey revealed that the Intermountain Livestock Judges Training is a worthwhile activity that improves attendees' judging skills and positively influences personal growth. The quantitative data indicate that the training is highly influential in reaching the established goals. Participants were asked to rate on a scale from 1 to 5 (1 = *not influential at all*, 2 = *mildly influential*, 3 = *moderately influential*, 4 = *highly influential*, 5 = *extremely influential*) how significant the training was in helping them as a judge at youth shows (Table 1).

**Table 1.**  
Impacts on Training Participants

Training goal	N	M	Frequency of responses				
			1	2	3	4	5
To understand a judge's role in youth development	77	3.92	2	4	14	36	21
To increase selection and judging skills and gain tools to train others	77	4.24	2	2	7	34	32
To increase terminology related to youth livestock shows	77	4.13	1	0	15	33	28
To learn how to make the show-ring experience educational and logical	77	4.10	1	3	13	33	27
To understand carcass evaluation in youth livestock projects	77	4.01	1	0	19	34	23

Data collected indicated that before attending the first training in 2004, 36 respondents had judged 232 county fairs, 24 state shows, and 13 regional shows. The data showed that after participating in the trainings, 46

respondents had judged an additional 318 county fairs, 29 state shows, and 15 regional shows. In all, the respondents had judged a total of 550 county fairs, 53 state shows, and 28 regional shows. By judging that many shows, the judges have interacted with many youths. The results indicated that new judges were trained, adding to the judging pool, and that trained judges had the opportunity to use skills gained to reach more youths. The number of judges who attended the training more than one time indicates that the training appeals to qualified livestock judges as a way to keep their judging skills current with the industry standards.

There were a total of 77 responses to the qualitative portion of the survey that included two open-ended questions. Responses to the first question, "How did participating in the Intermountain Livestock Judges Training influence your development as a judge?" included the following comments:

- "It gave excellent information on current industry standards for each animal. Great information on how to interact with youth you are judging. The carcass evaluations were an excellent learning experience."
- "Provided species specific evaluation framework and standards. Increased accuracy of decision making. Set a standard to measure my abilities by providing continuing education and updates of livestock industry trends in style and carcass industry demands. Set framework for being a responsible judge. Provided mentors to be inspired by and learn from."
- "I participated in the youth division and it helped a lot with oral reasons and terminology. Also, the swine clinic helped me to truly evaluate structure and describe it. It has also helped me find logic in tough classes and with my decision-making process."

The following comments are from the responses to the second question, "How did participating in the Intermountain Livestock Judges Training influence your personal growth?":

- "I am more confident. I am better able to communicate with youth in the show-ring. I can explain to clients in a one-on-one and group setting more easily. I am quicker to make decisions and I don't get frustrated when I have to think on my feet. I think I am better able to express myself in a variety of situations."
- "It helped me understand that each of us sees things from different perspectives, and that's OK."
- "It increased my self confidence. It helped me feel more comfortable interfacing with groups of people."

A review of the qualitative data revealed that 89% of the respondents indicated that the training had had a positive influence on them. The previously presented examples from the qualitative data indicate that the following training goals were met: increase participants' selection and judging abilities, increase participants' knowledge of terminology related to youth livestock shows, teach participants how to interact with youths and parents to make the show-ring experience an educational and logical event. Participants also were able to translate concepts learned at the training into everyday life.

## Conclusions

According to the Idaho Annual Extension Enrollment report, youth livestock projects continue to be the most popular projects for youth. Hiring trained judges is an important way to provide an educational experience at project completion. The Intermountain Livestock Judges Training positively affected the participants because

these trained judges now know how to work with youths in a manner that supports the mission of youth development. The importance of such knowledge is supported by Rusk et al. (2003), who reported that 51% of youths who participated in their study indicated an increase in self-confidence because of the positive experience they had during the show experience. The impact on youth development for those who interact with well-trained judges is potentially life changing.

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