

# Market Lamb Showmanship from Start to Finish

## 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 disguises its weaknesses. Many times, lambs of lesser quality place higher in a class because they are exhibited by an excellent showman who understands the lamb's strengths and 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 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 identify its strengths and weaknesses and 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, areas in and outside the show ring. In addition, the showman watches for other unknown details that could develop unexpectedly. Performing at the highest level every time you enter the ring as a showman will allow everything else to fall into place. In this guide, you will find information that will help you learn to become a more skilled showman.



*Figure 1. Correct halter placement and proper amount of slack to fit comfortably and allow the lamb to stand with its head parallel to the ground.*

## Animal Selection

One of the key ingredients for successful showmanship is to select a good animal, free of structural defects. While any animal may be shown, remember that it is always easier to show a high-quality animal free of major faults. Selection will be discussed in detail in another publication.

## At Home

### 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 hand-made using 3/8-inch cotton or nylon rope. For the animal's safety and comfort, be 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 (Figure 1).

Notice that the piece 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 (Figure 1). 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



*Figure 2. Encourage the lamb to move forward by applying slight pressure to the dock.*

as often as possible – for a minimum of 20 minutes each training session.

If an exhibitor has several lambs, practice leading and bracing an 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



*Figure 3. The showman's left hand should be placed under the lamb's muzzle and the right hand should be behind the lamb's head below his ears. A = ideal for smaller showman when moving lamb, B = ideal for larger showman when moving lamb; C = ideal for smaller showman when bracing lamb, D = ideal for larger showman when bracing lamb.*

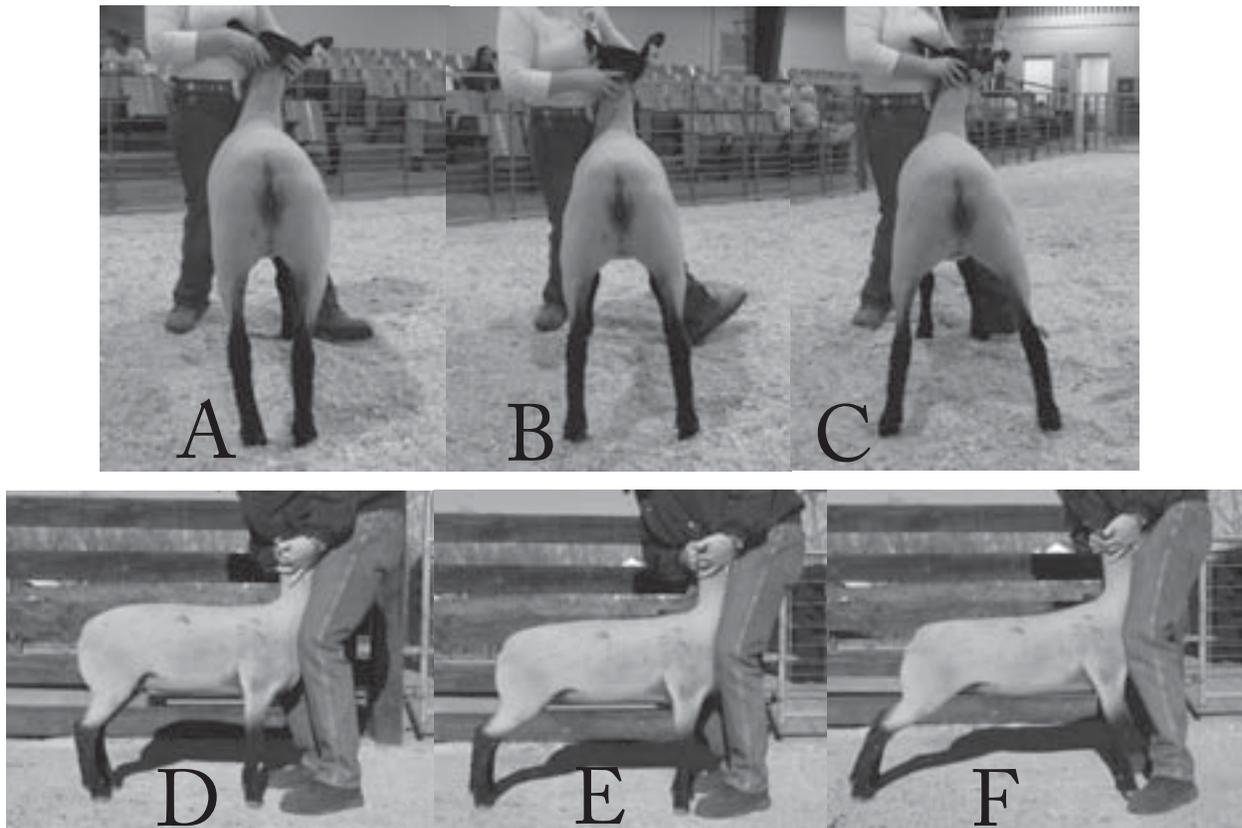


Figure 4. Correctly place each leg on the four corners of the lamb's body. Head-in or rear view: A = too narrow, B = ideal, C = too wide. Profile or side view: D = too short, E = ideal, F = too stretched.

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 (Figure 2). 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 (Figure 3). 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.

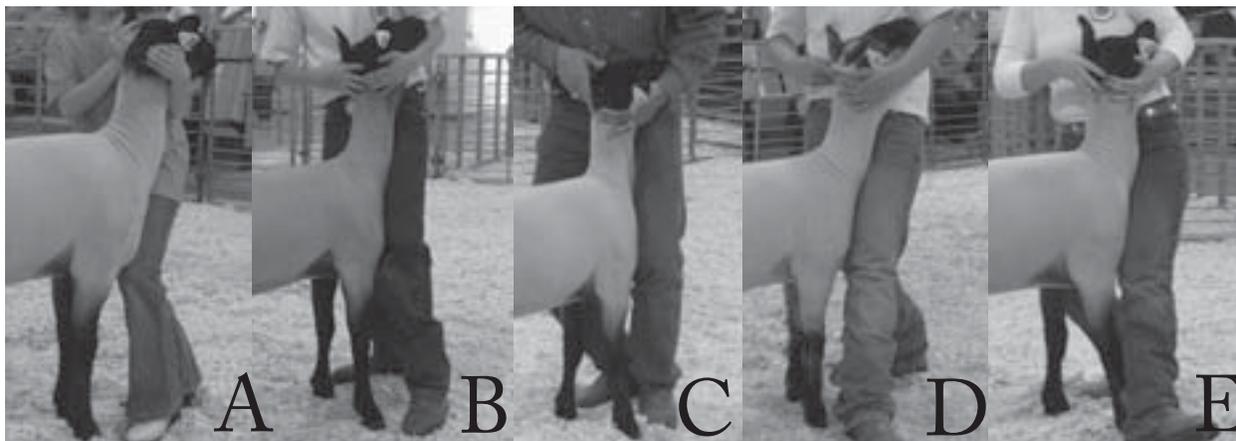
A good showman must be prepared, so lambs should lead easily from both sides.

### 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 (Figure 4). 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.

### Bracing

After lambs have learned to lead without a halter and to place their feet correctly each time they are stopped (some minor adjustments may be necessary), you are ready to be-



*Figure 5. Correct hand, knee, and feet placement by the showman is critical to effectively brace a lamb. A = ideal for smaller showman, B = ideal for intermediate showman, C = ideal for larger showman, D and E = hands and knees are correct, but keep feet in front of lamb instead of potentially sticking out in the way of the judge or other showmen.*

gin training your lamb to brace. In the braced position, the lamb's muscles are tensed and its body feels firm, not soft. A firm handling lamb is more desirable because softness tends to indicate that an animal is fat.

Teaching a lamb to brace can be one of the most frustrating parts of training. Some lambs naturally brace when pressure is properly applied to the chest, but most lambs tend to move backward. To properly brace an animal, the showman's hands, knees, and feet must be positioned correctly. This will differ based on the showman's size and what feels more comfortable and natural (Figure 5).

Use the combination of hand, knee, and foot positioning that works best for you and the lamb. Techniques may change as the showman becomes taller and stronger. Examples A, B, and C in Figure 5 are the most desirable show positions. Examples D and E can create problems because the showman's foot can become an obstacle to another showman and the judge. In addition, the showman cannot apply as much pressure from those positions as from A, B, or C.

The most effective way to brace a lamb is to use what feels most comfortable and natural to the showman while getting the best possible brace from the lamb. The lamb's front feet can be lifted slightly off of the ground to set them or to cue the beginning of a brace. All four feet should remain on the ground while bracing.

Be careful not to choke the lamb or hinder its breathing by applying too much pressure directly down the middle portion of its neck. If a lamb begins to pull its head downward or seems to be trying to cough, immediately remove all pressure from its neck. Some lambs may begin to tremble slightly, but will return to normal in a few seconds without harm.

The most effective way to teach a lamb to brace requires a combination of techniques. First, the lamb's feet should be positioned properly on the corners of his body. Second, the showman's hands, knees, and feet also must be in the correct positions. Third, apply pressure by placing the knee into the lamb's shoulder and chest. Never pull the lamb forward, but always push toward the lamb.

At first, the lamb will probably step backward. If that happens, lift or squeeze the lamb's dock and apply enough pressure to make it move forward. Allow the animal to take several steps forward, then stop and repeat. This exercise may require the help of another person, but should be the most effective. Continue practicing until the lamb begins to respond by bracing against the pressure applied by the showman.

Teaching a lamb to brace requires time and patience. It is natural for the animal to move away from pressure, not toward it. Never try to force a lamb to brace downhill. Instead, position the lamb so he is on level footing or

facing uphill to practice bracing. That position is more natural for the animal.

Another training method involves placing a lamb on a platform just high enough so he thinks nothing is below him. A trimming stand works well for this method. Some showmen may choose to set the stand in an inclined position. Brace the lamb, and as he steps backward and cannot feel solid ground, he will tend to push against the showman. When he does this, allow the lamb to move forward, and repeat the steps until he does not step backward. Make sure the platform is high enough to be effective, yet low enough to assure the safety of the lamb and showman.

Some trainers push a lamb backward into a fence or wall where the animal cannot step back. While this can be effective, it should be attempted only after trying the other methods discussed, and with care to avoid possible injury to the lamb. Another method involves backing lambs into a water puddle to teach them to brace, because sheep tend to avoid water. This might be effective, but try other methods first.

Bracing is a critical part of showmanship, so showmen must make sure lambs learn to brace. Just as people are right- or left-handed, lambs are right- or left-dominant. Determine which is the dominant side, and use it to your advantage when bracing your lamb. Bracing lambs for an extended period will increase the endurance of both lamb and showman. Practice bracing for one minute, then two minutes, and finally three minutes.

### **At-home practice**

As lambs begin to master the training, showmen should practice show ring techniques. Ask parents, siblings, friends, or volunteer leaders to act as “judges.” This will allow you and your lamb to test your skills as a show team. A lamb should be comfortable when handled by a judge, so the more this can be practiced, the less likely that the lamb will misbehave in the show ring.

Practice moving the lamb from one location to another. Master the ability to

change from one side of the animal to the other at the appropriate time to keep the animal between the showman and judge. This movement could be beneficial in the show ring. Refer to the section “*Moving around the show ring*” (page 6) for details on specific showmanship techniques.

## **Show Time**

### **Preparing to show**

Preparing for a show involves attention to details that vary depending on the show. For example, much more preparation will be required before a state fair than a local show.

Always consider the basics of animal food, water, and shelter. Calculate the amount of feed required while traveling and at the show. Use a container that is easily transported and will keep the feed clean and dry. Be sure to carry a little extra in case of a spill. Collect measuring devices, buckets, and feed troughs that will be needed at the show.

Take water from home. Animals can detect differences in water, just as humans can, and could refuse to drink. This will cause the animal to become dehydrated, and it will hurt its performance. Some exhibitors use a flavor additive to attempt to mask the differences in water. If you try this method, begin adding the flavoring to the water at home at least two weeks before the show. Teach lambs to drink from a bucket, and use that bucket at the show. Sheep are creatures of habit, and they begin to stress when habits are broken. Try to maintain stability in their routine by using the same water buckets and feed troughs used at home.

After arriving at the show, allow lambs to drink. Halter and walk them for 10 to 15 minutes to familiarize them with the environment and help them relax. Some shows have restrictions on where animals are allowed, so be aware and follow rules that designate restricted areas. After walking the lambs, put them in their pen, and allow them to lie down and relax. When possible, try to minimize traffic through the area to ensure the animals' comfort.

Feed lambs at the same time they would have been fed at home. Walk them 10 to 15 minutes every three to four hours to keep them

healthy and energetic. This schedule may be altered according to the weight and condition of the lamb. If they are kept in a barn, take them outside – or at least to the doorway, if rules restrict leaving the building – so they are exposed to fresh air. If lambs are kept in their trailer during a show, be sure to keep them cool in hot conditions.

### **Appropriate dress**

Lamb exhibitors do not have to follow a specific dress code unless an individual show requires a certain type of dress. Following are some rules for dressing for the show ring:

- Dress neatly and professionally. Dress comfortably, yet appropriately for the show ring.
- Wear a long-sleeved, button-front shirt or blouse. In extremely hot weather, a short-sleeved, button-front shirt is permissible. It is more professional than a polo-type shirt. The shirt should be tucked in.
- Shirts made of brightly colored or uniquely patterned fabrics should be chosen as “show” shirts. A unique color or print allows a judge to mentally connect an animal to a shirt and helps him or her remember a specific lamb or lambs in a class – since most lambs appear similar at a glance.
- Wear clean dress pants or jeans with a belt.
- Spaghetti-straps, low-cut tops, blouses or T-shirts, and worn, ripped, or faded jeans have no place in the show ring.
- Wear clean, nice-looking shoes or boots. They should be chosen for comfort and practicality and should protect the showman’s feet while allowing easy movement around the show ring.
- Hair should be combed neatly. Long hair may be held in place with a braid, clip, ribbon, etc. A unique, yet professional, appearance might help make a positive impression on a judge.
- Hats and caps should not be worn in the ring.
- All grooming equipment should be left at the animal’s pen or in a showbox.

### **Moving around the show ring**

Showmanship is a mental game. An outstanding showman is at the peak of his/her game from the time just before entering the show ring to just after leaving it. As mentioned before, a showman must be completely aware of him/herself, the lamb, the judge, ring steward(s), other showmen, other lambs, areas in and outside the show ring, and situations that might develop unexpectedly. Showmen or exhibitors must maintain mental focus on each of these factors while appearing calm and moving easily around the show ring.

An experienced showman will watch the first class or two (unless he/she is participating) to identify the judge and the pattern the judge is using to evaluate the class of lambs. Most judges establish a pattern in the first two classes and use that method to evaluate animals throughout the day.

While waiting to enter a class, a showman should begin to focus on the job to be done when entering the show ring. Exhibitors should locate the judge immediately upon entering the ring and make eye contact, which tells the judge he has the showman’s attention. The showman should walk his/her lamb with its head held high. Lambs should be moved slowly and easily around the ring, allowing the judge to evaluate each animal before moving to the next lamb. The showman should look ahead and determine where they are going, then return focus to the judge.

Once inside the show ring, everything outside it should be blocked – except potential distractions to the animal that might impair the showman’s ability to present it. Examples are high-traffic areas, a crowd of people along the edge of the show ring, a group of children playing, or anything that might cause the lamb to become excited and stop showing properly. Parents, siblings, volunteers, or others who may be trying to coach the showman should have confidence in their youth, and youth should have faith in themselves that preparation for the show was completed at home in practice sessions. No additional coaching is required. Ringside coaching is distracting to the judge and interferes with the



Figure 6. Head-In/Rear-View (left) or Profile/Side-View/Head to Tail (right).

showman's presentation of the animal. If a 7- to 9-year-old novice showman requires some guidance, it should take place when the judge is not nearby and in a way that does not create unnecessary attention.

A ring steward will generally assist exhibitors and their lambs into the show ring in a pattern that has been set by the judge. It is important to locate the ring steward and follow his/her directions while maintaining eye contact and focusing on the judge. The ring steward will generally lead exhibitors into one of two formations: head-in/rear-view or profile/side-view/head to tail (Figure 6). In either position, be careful not to get covered up or "lost" in a corner of the ring.

#### *Head-In/Rear-View*

When exhibitors are leading lambs into a rear-view, the judge wants to analyze all animals from the rear for structural correctness and degree of muscling down an animal's back and through its hind legs (from stifle to stifle). The hind legs should be set into the correct positions immediately after the showman has stopped the animal side-by-side to the next animal in line. There is no need to spend much time on setting the front legs because they are not visible. The lamb should be braced anytime the judge is evaluating it. In this position, the lamb can be braced from either side.

#### *Profile/Side-View/Head to Tail*

Exhibitors might be asked to present their lambs on a side-view to allow the judge to analyze the lamb's profile. Lambs should have their back feet placed first and immediately start bracing. Maintain a slight brace when animals are on a side-view. Animals should always be kept in a straight line. Do

not push your lamb out of line toward the judge in an effort to be seen. The judge will find the right lamb.

Showmen should remember to check the lamb's feet. Always make sure lambs are set correctly whenever they are being viewed by the judge. If a foot is significantly misplaced while the judge is evaluating the animal, it must be corrected immediately, and bracing should begin again.

If you are participating in a large class, allow your lamb to relax when the judge is not evaluating it. If the lamb moves a foot out of place, do not move the foot back immediately. Instead, wait until the judge is about to evaluate the lamb again and then correctly reset its feet. Overworking or constantly resetting a lamb's feet may lead to an aggravated, uncooperative lamb.

#### *Front-View*

A judge may choose to walk around in front of the lambs to get a front-view and evaluate each lamb on structural correctness and muscling through the front end of the



Figure 7. Front-view positioning of lamb and showman.



Figure 8. Ears should be held parallel to the ground unless the breed is noted for erect ears. A = ideal ear placement, B = acceptable but not preferred, C = unacceptable because this placement is not natural.

lamb. Stand beside the shoulder opposite the judge and face the same direction as the lamb (Figure 7). Correctly place the lamb's front feet so he does not stand too wide or narrow; hold the lamb's head so a straight line can be drawn from nose to tail. Do not step away from the animal because some control over the lamb will be lost, and the showman's movement tends to pull the lamb's head out of line from its body. Hold the lamb's head high as the judge analyzes him. The lamb's ears may be held parallel or lifted slightly above parallel to the ground, but should not be held erect or pointing straight up as this distracts from the animal's appearance (Figure 8).

The showman should stand straight and tall when presenting a lamb. Bending over decreases control over the lamb and will cause strain on the showman's back. If the showman chooses, he/she should wait until the judge passes the lamb and one or two more before slowly moving to the side opposite the judge. Moving any sooner may distract the judge and block the view of the lamb if the judge wants to compare animals.

It is not mandatory that a showman change sides. If the showman is positioned correctly, the front of the sheep can be seen by the judge without any interference by the exhibitor, regardless of the side chosen. A showman should be prepared to brace his/her lamb as the judge returns to the rear-view of the lambs.

Moving lambs from one point to another is just as important as correct positioning of their feet and bracing (Figures 9.1-9.9). When a judge asks a showman to move to another location, take the most direct path available. Lambs should be turned slightly and pushed

out of line before proceeding to the desired location with the lamb between the showman and judge. Do not push the lamb straight back or it will think you are signaling it to brace, and it will not move correctly.

The showman should maintain eye contact with the judge while glancing at the desired destination. When showmen are required to change sides, they must move around the front of the lamb. Do not step behind the lamb. Showmen may move between the lamb and judge for a moment to position themselves on the correct side. The lamb should not be turned completely around just to keep it between the showman and judge. By moving quickly, yet smoothly, between the lamb and judge, a showman will not block the judge's view long enough to create a problem. Instead, he/she is able to move the lamb more quickly and easily than by turning the lamb around.

If a judge asks to have a lamb moved toward and away from him, the showman should make sure to walk the lamb in a straight line in both directions. Lambs should not be moved in half circles or offset from the judge because this will not present the desired view. Showmen should never quit showing their animal until they leave the show ring.

While exhibiting a lamb, never squat or kneel. At one time, the idea of kneeling or squatting was thought to make the animal appear taller or to keep a tall showman from making the animal appear smaller. Control by the showman is sacrificed when the exhibitor chooses to kneel or squat. In addition, it may be distracting to a judge because the showman is constantly up and down rather than standing throughout the duration of the class.

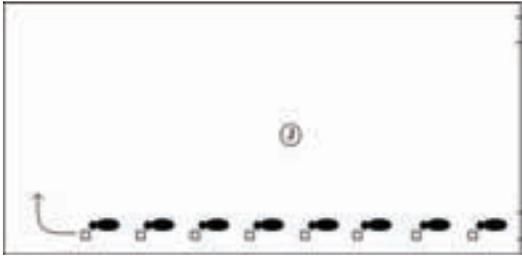


Figure 9.1. Animals entering the show ring on a profile. Notice the animal is always between the showman and judge.

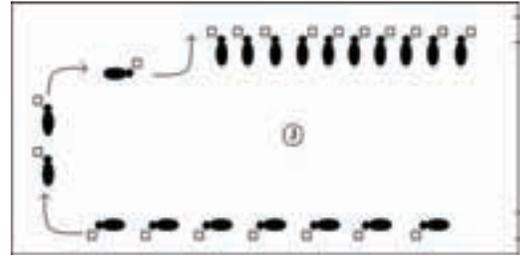


Figure 9.2. Animals entering the show ring and lining up on a rear-view. Notice the positions of the judge and showmen.

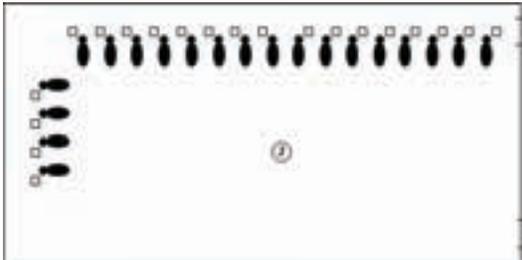


Figure 9.3. All animals lined up on a rear-view.

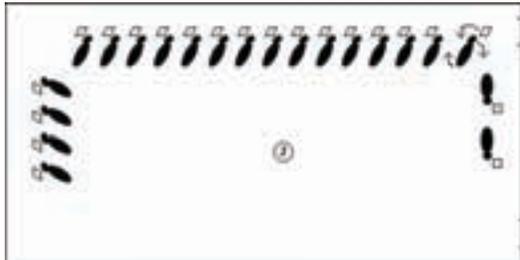


Figure 9.4. All animals begin to move to a profile or side-view. Move to the animal's left side, push their front end away from you, and follow the lamb in front of you.

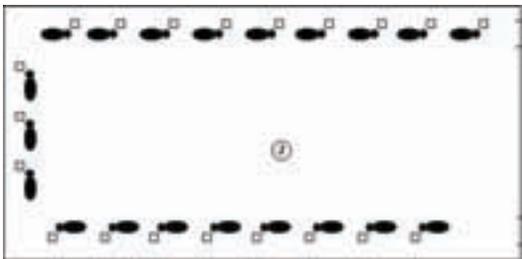


Figure 9.5. All animals lined up on a profile or side-view.

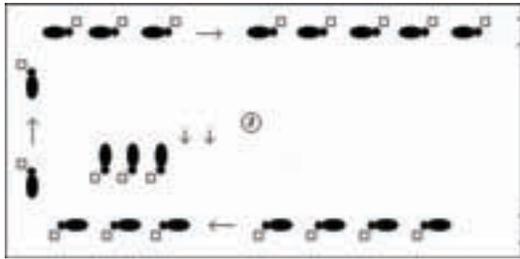


Figure 9.6. As animals move out of line to another location, move animals forward to fill gaps.

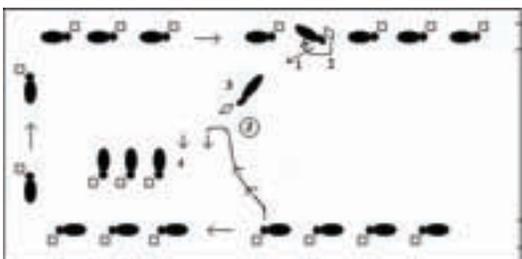


Figure 9.7. (Top) Push the lamb out of line, move around the front of the lamb to change sides, and proceed to the designated location. (Bottom) Push the lamb out of line and proceed to the designated spot in line.

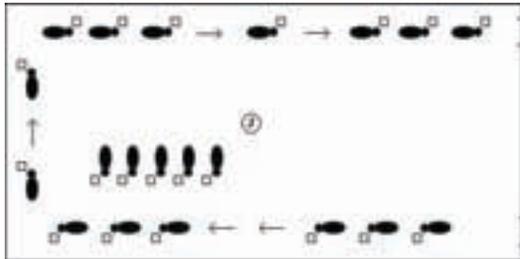


Figure 9.8. Completed moves from Figure 9.7; arrows show the need to fill gaps that have been left by the lambs in the middle.

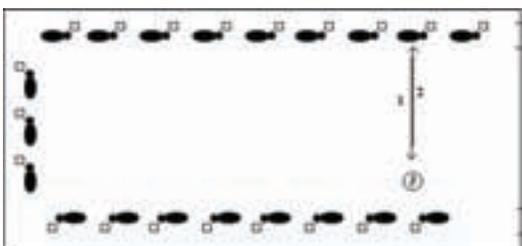


Figure 9.9. Move animals directly to and from a judge. Do not move in half circles or off-line.

Be courteous in the ring. Do not crowd other showmen or their lambs. Try not to cover or hide another showman's lamb.

## Questions

Many judges ask questions during a showmanship class. However, these should measure the youth's ability to show the animal, not necessarily the knowledge gained from the project. Showmen should learn many things from their projects, but this knowledge should be reflected in a project record book or herdsman contest. Showmanship classes are designed primarily to test a youth's ability to exhibit an animal to its greatest potential. Showmen should know the animal's weight, strengths, and weaknesses. The showman should strive to enhance the lamb's strengths while disguising its weaknesses.

Judges will normally not decide the placing of a showmanship class based on project-oriented questions. Showmen can be coached to answer virtually any project-oriented question that would be undisputable by a judge. However, when a showman is asked about a lamb's strengths and weaknesses, his/her answers may be disputed by a judge, and these qualities would have direct relevance on how the animal would be placed in a market lamb class. Showmanship class winners should reflect those who have the greatest ability to exhibit a lamb, not necessarily those with the most knowledge about feeding, fitting, and marketing – knowledge that is tapped in a stockman's class or Skillathon. If an exhibitor had two animals in the same class that had an equal opportunity of winning, a champion *showman* would be selected on the basis of his/her knowledge of animal presentation, not on industry- or project-related questions.

## Attitude and Emotions

Upon entering the show ring, a showman must be mentally prepared and focused on the task. Emotions and attitudes are secondary. Showmen are often told to "smile at the judge." Smiles are good when they are not forced. A judge can determine if a youth is having a good time in the show ring without

having to see a big smile. Sometimes showmen begin to focus on smiling instead of showing the animal. An intense face is not necessarily negative as long as the showman does not appear to be angry.

If a lamb begins to jump or misbehave, the showman must maintain his/her composure, not become irritated with the lamb, and not lose patience. A calm, composed showman with an uncooperative lamb can still do quite well in showmanship. However, if a showman loses his/her patience, lambs will usually act worse, leading to a battle between the showman and the animal that neither will win.

When a showman enters the ring, he/she must understand there will be only one class winner, and the odds of winning every class entered are very slim. Showmen should always go into a class to do their best, but should not be discouraged if they do not win. The placing must be accepted, and the showman should move on to his/her next goal. Showmen should not get upset with the judge, another exhibitor, their parents, and/or their lamb because they did not receive the expected placing. Judges are paid very little for the job they perform and often times are verbally criticized more than praised. Showmen must respect the judge's opinion. If they are not willing to do so, they should stay at home.

Showmen who become angry, pout or curse at a show should not be allowed to participate until they can manage their emotions and attitude. Tears are shed in times of joy, at the conclusion of a first-year project, in times of disappointment, and at the conclusion of a showman's career. However, a tear should never be shed because a showman is angry. Following these principles will lead to a much more enjoyable showmanship experience.

Judges are sometimes approached immediately after a show with comments and questions. A judge should never be approached with questions such as, "What did you not like about my lamb?" or "Why didn't my lamb do better?" Chances are the judge will not remember an individual animal after completing his judging responsibilities. When possible,

whether you had a successful day or not, thank the judge for his/her time and remember to maintain a good attitude.

Parents, volunteers, agriculture teachers, and agents should encourage their youth to continue to work hard, promote good sportsmanship, and be seen as positive role models for other youth. Remember the big picture: “Trophies, plaques, buckles, and other awards can tarnish and collect dust, but our youth will be the true test of success of our livestock projects. Don’t do anything that will tarnish our kids. Instead, make them the shining result of a successful show career that will lead to a bright future.”

Adults should always keep in mind that the livestock program is designed as a tool and a learning experience for turning youth into responsible leaders of the future.

## **Conclusion**

This guide aims to provide the inexperienced showman a basic roadmap for developing fundamental showmanship skills. Experienced showmen may also benefit from it. Inexperienced showmen are encouraged to work closely with more experienced showmen in an effort to gain skills and knowledge. Experienced showmen should take responsibility to help inexperienced showmen learn. Helping others succeed is a direct reflection of personal success, and you should strive to make the reflection shine brighter than your own.

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