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# MSU Livestock Judging

A LOOK BACK AT A TIMELESS PASTIME

By Alaina Dismukes

**L**IVESTOCK JUDGING IS a timeless extracurricular activity at Mississippi State University. From year to year, the players change, but the sport itself keeps with tradition. And the skills learned by team members continue to set it apart from other clubs and organizations.

As individuals diligently judge sets of four animals from the meat animal species which includes cattle, hogs, goats, and sheep, team members categorize and place the animals accordingly, and then they present their reasons for their animal placements to judges.

Being on the competitive team is a huge time commitment as the team often spends 36 out of 52 weekends a year on the road traveling across the country to

practice and compete, but for its members, livestock judging means connecting with others and becoming better equipped in a skill they are passionate about.

Established in the 1920s, the MSU's Livestock Judging team stretches far back into Mississippi State history. The team became dormant in the mid-90s, but was re-established in 2013 when Brett Crow, instructor in the Department of Animal and Dairy Sciences, joined the department and reinvigorated the judging team.

W. G. Griffin, member of the 1962 team, spoke about his experience judging livestock at MSU.

"My experience was outstanding. It was just like being on a football team with how we practiced just about every afternoon

and on weekends," Griffin said. "There were some challenging aspects, though, like verbally describing and placing two similar animals in the same class."

For Griffin and his team, all of the hard work was well worth it.

"It was quite a learning experience. The travel was eye opening and beneficial to us country boys from Mississippi. Competing was fun, and whenever you performed well at one of the competitions it was incredibly rewarding," he said.

Griffin's core team consisted of five men who were all Mississippi natives—Bill Harris, Charles Axley, Clayton Swayze, and Larry Kitchens. Individually, they each won separate categories in different contests throughout the year.

Dr. Jim Newsome, who coached the team from 1983–1989, provided a coach's perspective on MSU livestock judging. Before coming to coach in Starkville, Newsome was a student on the livestock judging team at the University of Florida. He then took over the livestock judging team as a graduate student at Mississippi State after Dr. Howard Miller, judging team coach from 1972 to 1983.

Newsome emphasized MSU's rich history of livestock judging.

"I think it goes back to Mississippi State's roots of maintaining its reputation of being a serious land grant institution. A lot of land grants have moved away from that core function, so I'm glad that Mississippi State, among others, has



not,” he said.

Newsome’s claim to fame as a judging coach was that every team he coached had the thrill of winning at least one competition, if not more.

“One of the most enjoyable parts of it was the lifelong relationships I built with students and teammates during my career in livestock judging,” he said.

Newsome said he often coached teams that were novice to livestock judging which, while challenging in the beginning, turned out to be surprisingly beneficial to the team’s overall growth.

“The main challenge was that we had to start from ground zero in the spring, but a positive aspect was that the team members only knew what I taught them so there were no bad habits to break,” he remembered. “They judged and presented their reasons the way that I taught them, and then by the time we got to the fall semester, they were a competitive team. It’s like coaching any activity or sport in that you have to do what your coach tells you to do. That’s the only way it really works.”

Abigail Jenkins, a 2018 judging team member and MSU’s winner of the “All American” title at the National Contest in Louisville, Kentucky, enjoyed her time on the team and the lasting benefits gained from the experience.

For junior animal and dairy science major Jenkins, the commitment has taught her essential life skills. She has not only learned about judging livestock, a skill that will assist her in selecting the best animal in production systems, but she has also learned more about the livestock industry which will assist her in her future career. Most importantly, she has developed life-long friendships with those pursuing a common passion.

“This experience has given me valuable connections with people in the industry,



taught me time management, and equipped me to be able to judge junior livestock shows in the future,” she said. “I’m glad I had the opportunity to be a part of the team.”

In contrast to the 1962 all-male team Griffin was a part of, the 2019 class is all females. Crow said it has been the only all-female livestock judging team at MSU that he is aware of. The 2019 team members are Logan Whipple from Mississippi, Julia Tate from Texas, Madalyn Jennings from Louisiana, and Kirsta Murphree and Cassidy Catrett who are both from Alabama.

Crow emphasized the team is open to anyone regardless of major or past experience.

“The team attracts students from all walks of life. Some students raise livestock growing up, and others are introduced to the livestock industry through 4-H or through a number of other avenues,” he said.

For each team member, Griffin, Newsome, and Jenkins, when asked about how they would describe their experience in livestock judging, all seemed to be filled with nostalgia as they tried to put into words what being involved in livestock judging meant to them personally.

It is clear that each members’ experience has meant a great deal to each individual, but Griffin may have summed it up best.

“Being a member of the judging team was one of the most rewarding things that I was able to be a part of while I was at Mississippi State University. Nothing took the place of it,” he said.

Livestock judging through the years has changed at MSU as coaches and team members have come and gone, but the activity remains at the heart of an institution that believes in the importance of agriculture. In years past and present at MSU, livestock judging was and continues to be an important milestone in the lives of its team members.

**TOP:** 2019-2020 Livestock Judging Team (left to right) Front row: Logan Whipple, Madalyn Jennings, Kirsta Murphree, Julia Tate, Cassidy Catrett. Back row: Coach Brett Crow.

**LEFT:** 1962 Livestock Judging Team (left to right) Front row: W. G. Griffin Jr., L. W. Kitchens, C. C. Axley, W. E. Harris, F. L. Passbach Jr. Back row: C. C. Swayze, J. A. Loomis, Coach C. J. Christians, R. E. Gardner, M. S. Knowlton