

COUNTDOWN TO

SHOWDAY

It's not your freshly starched jeans, belt buckle and lucky shirt that make you ready to show. It's the hours spent in the barn getting to know your pig from day one.

by RACHEL STINE

The sprinter takes his place in the starting blocks, a nervous sweat running down his eyebrow as he listens for the gun. Shattering the world record, a mere 9.7 seconds later he crosses the finish line. He makes it look easy. But he's trained nearly his entire life for those few moments on a stopwatch.

Showing livestock is often compared to playing a sport. It's not just about the game – show day – it's all the daily hard work that goes on behind the scene that makes the feeling of receiving the purple banner worth it.

Notable hog breeders Luke McDonnell, New Castle, Ind., and Travis Platt, who owns Platt Showpigs and co-owns Upperhand Genetics near Roanoke, Ind., offer some advice for youth exhibitors to position their project in the prime spot to look its best at a show.

getting started

Today's champion barrows and gilts are complete – they combine design, freshness, body condition and flexibility on feet and legs, according to Platt, who judges hog shows across the country.

"Balance is as important as anything. You don't want too much or too little of any one thing," he says.

McDonnell tells his customers the same thing.

"Every judge has something a little different they like more, but I tell kids if their hog is square built and sound and can maintain a drive, they're going to be up there towards the top three," he says.

He says in the past 12 years he's been involved in the business, hogs have changed from a harder, drier exterior to a softer, more production centered look. But, the keys that set the winner apart don't change, he continues.

"Regardless of which direction the pendulum swings and what the fad is, the class winner is the best built and the soundest – the one that combines the most positives."

To keep current with the changes, Platt advises youth to attend as many shows as possible.

"Major stock shows, state fairs and National Junior Swine Association (NJSA) shows are great places to see hogs and, more importantly, talk to breeders."

The first place to start when selecting a showpig project is by talking to reputable breeders who will sell you a complete pig, Platt says. But even more important than the hog or the person you buy it from is having a goal, McDonnell adds.

"I don't start out trying to sell to somebody when they first walk in the barn," he says. "The first thing I do is understand what it is he or she is trying to accomplish."

And it needs to be a family goal – especially for younger exhibitors, McDonnell continues.

"If Dad wants to win Houston, and the kid just wants to go to the county fair and spend time with his friends, there's going to be a lot of conflict," he says. "Everybody needs to be involved."

After the pig is purchased and a goal is set, there are several show preparations to be made, even when the show is a few months away.

90 days out

Platt has several loyal customers who turn to him for advice from the time they bring their hogs home right up until show day. Three month before a show, an exhibitor should be beginning to work with and weigh animals on a regular basis, feeding good nutrition and getting their hair and skin conditioned, he says.

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KEYS TO SUCCESS

Amongst all of their advice, Platt and McDonnell say the keys to truly succeeding in the showing begin with proper show preparation. They say there are five simple keys to capturing your next champion title:

1. Set a goal from the beginning.
2. Exercise and get your hog prepared to drive early.
3. Feed the proper nutrition and provide enough water at each stage of life.
4. Brush your hog and keep bedding dry to maintain the animal's coat.
5. Carefully clip before each show.

“Working with your animals gets them broke to drive later on,” Platt says. “I’ll even work them in groups in the beginning.”

McDonnell agrees with the importance of working with hogs early.

“I make sure kids understand it’s never too early to bring their pigs out of the pen – even as soon as they get home,” he says.

However, since the point is to get them

ready to show, make sure every time they come out, it’s within a controlled setting where they’re not likely to bust into a big run, he recommends. Also, it’s best to start out slow.

“In the first few weeks, five minutes of exercise just to get them used to a whip and walking outside in a different environment is fine,” he says. “Short time periods limit blow ups where they want to run or fight you.”

As for nutrition 90 days out from a show, McDonnell recommends a grower-based, lower-protein (16-18 percent) feed, with careful evaluation along the way.

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“At that stage, we are generally looking at feet and leg issues,” he says. “If pigs are growing a little harder and we feel like they need to catch up with their skeletons, we will slow them down.”

Platt takes a similar approach.

“My theory is to get the pig to 200 pounds, evaluating whether or not it’s necessary to ‘hit the brakes’ and hold them back or not,” he says. “At 200 pounds their growth pattern is evident.”

Knowing approximately how much a hog weighs as well as knowing where you want to be on show day will help decide what kind of nutrition a showpig needs at this stage.

Platt recommends weighing weekly when feeding pigs from 100-200 pounds.

“Knowing where we are and having an idea of where we want to go is the key factor to making sure we start out in the right direction 90 days out,” McDonnell says.

60 days ’til show

About two months before a show, McDonnell says hogs should continue to increase the duration of their exercise and be worked individually.

“Lots of five to seven minute exercises increase their endurance,” he says. “Brush them, drive them just like you would going out of a holding pen, then put them up.”

Platt says being aware of your hog’s target endpoint will let you decide how often to feed – two times a day if you’re trying to maintain the animal, and three times if your hog needs to be pushed. Regardless, he recommends singly penning and hand feeding from at least two months prior to show day.

McDonnell says there’s no one-size-fits-all method to feeding showpigs. The exact formula all depends on the condition of the hog.

“If one’s a little harder bodied, look at increasing the fat content; if he needs more shape and muscle or is behind weight wise, a little Paylean® for a short period will get him going,” he says.

Also, although you should be monitoring your pigs’ nutrition and exterior appearance, now is the time to take a closer look at how their environment affects their skin and hair, McDonnell says.

“The main thing is to keep pens clean and dry – give them fresh chips and some cushion off the concrete,” he says.

His experience is that washing and rinsing

WALK IT OUT

Pictured right: Platt advises all youth to start walking their hogs as soon as possible. Make sure that each time you take the hogs out, it is in a controlled setting where they will be less likely to bust into a run. Working hogs at home not only increases endurance for the long drives in the ring, but also allows the hog and showman to become more comfortable and at ease with each other.





BRUSH WITH THE BEST

Pictured left: Maddie Caldwell, Ill., works with the skin and hair of her pig to keep it in top condition.

Both Platt and McDonnell agree that skin and hair condition is a top priority. McDonnell suggests to clean bedding daily, change shavings regularly and brush vigorously twice a day with a good stiff-bristle brush. Platt says he prefers to wash and work conditioner into the hog's skin.

often has the tendency to make feet softer, so he advises vigorously brushing twice a day with a good stiff-bristle brush instead.

However, Platt says for him, washing and working conditioner into pigs' hair helps to condition the hair and calm the animal down as show time gets closer.

30 days and counting

By the time a show is a month or less away, exhibitors are thinking about what to pack and who the judge will be. This isn't the time to slack on time in the barn, though.

"Start increasing their exercise to increase endurance before a show," McDonnell says.

He recommends working up to 20 minutes at a time, but not going much more than that.

And keep them out of the hot weather, Platt adds. Make sure to walk them in the early morning or late night to keep them from getting overworked.

As for feeding, again, it depends on the animal. Be sure to closely monitor body condition and make adjustments as needed, he says.

In order to evaluate if your showpig is on the right track, the best thing you can do is check weights at least once a week, according to McDonnell.

"I always advise to weigh at the same time and the same way," he says. "We weigh empty right before feeding so we get an honest weight."

And that skin and hair you've been pampering – it's best to leave the clippers put away until right before the show, he adds.

"We have the best luck trying to keep the hair as long and clean as we can and then clipping very late. They're never as fresh as when you first clip them."

When helping youth exhibitors, McDonnell says he very rarely cuts one shorter than 1/2 of an inch, and he will clip the pig's head, legs and line a few days before departure. But, he advises, leave room for a final "clean up" of the animal's line until arrival at the show, in case the weather changes. He also says that if a hog looks like it's drying out, a product like Champion's Choice will help to give its skin a little extra moisture.

show time

Once you finally arrive at the show, there are a few things to keep in mind amidst all of the excitement, Platt and McDonnell say.

The biggest thing they both emphasize is hydration.

"Regardless of what specific weight you're trying to make, make sure you always keep moisture in them," McDonnell says. "When they get dehydrated, they start losing muscle, and you just can't replace water."

But don't just forge them full of water, Platt says.

"Whenever pigs have been on the road a long time, bring them back slow and get them maintained," he recommends.

And if it's really hot, rinse your pigs, even a couple times a day at the show. Making sure they're comfortable is the bottom line, according to Platt.

McDonnell reminds his customers that the scale is not their enemy. While many people are worried about what a hog is going to weigh and if theirs will make weigh back, the right weight for one is different from the next.

"The key is to get that pig not to what you want him to weigh, but what weight fits the hog best," he says.

While every judge has his own structural size preference, McDonnell believes anything over 255 pounds is competitive enough to win.

To be in the grand drive, he emphasizes getting out of class first.

"If you weigh your pig in where it looks best, then you have an opportunity to go back in where everyone's on a more even playing field for a breed champion drive, because now weights aren't as specific," McDonnell says.

While in an ideal world every pig would gain two pounds a day every day, reality is that they don't feed that way. The best way to reach an ideal weight for your specific hog is to keep gauging how it's doing on a regular basis.

A one-size-fits-all mentality could lead to a moderate, shorter-framed hog that would ideally carry 260 pounds being weighed in at 280 and looking like a "pony in a draft horse show," McDonnell says.

Careful show preparation doesn't happen overnight. Although it may feel like a sprint when you're in the ring, it's the continual work and patience in the months prior that makes your animal look its best on show day.

Knowing what's best for your animal – the right kind of exercise, nutrition and conditioning – the next champion in the making may just be in your barn.

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— TRAVIS PLATT