



Sheep Showmanship

Oklahoma Cooperative Extension Service • Division of Agricultural Sciences and Natural Resources

As a sheep showman, your primary goal is to develop, groom, and present your animal so that it will make the best impression possible on the judge. At the same time, you must be courteous to other exhibitors and follow the instructions of the ring steward and the judge.

When exhibiting sheep in a showmanship contest or in breeding and market classes, the exhibitor must have total control of the animal at all times. The judge will expect certain other attributes in his top showmen – quiet, “unshowy” calm handling; evidence of having trained the animal to smooth, quiet actions, and properly posing the animal. The judge will also expect your animal to be clean and properly groomed, and he will expect you to be neatly dressed. Check your show catalogs to ensure that you are following the established dress codes.

Sheep showmen should be concerned with properly handling and controlling the animal as well as posing and walking the sheep. Remember that the basic skills are the most important.

In posing sheep when the judge is at the rear and viewing the animals from a distance, the exhibitor should be facing his animal with each hand grasping a cheek (Figure 1). The exhibitor may be kneeling or squatting, whichever position provides for full control of the animal. He/she should be backed away the animal so that the judge can see clearly. The animal should be posed with the feet moderately spread, but tucked under enough so the back does not sag. The animal should be posed on level ground or with the front feet on slightly rising ground. The exhibitor should make sure the animal's front feet are not in a hole. The exhibitor should not place the hands at any other place on the sheep, such as over the shoulders, neck, or back. Figure 1a shows the position of the exhibitor when the judge approaches to handle the animal.

When the animal's legs are out of position, the front feet may be best placed and spread by moving one front leg at a time. The exhibitor maintains a grasp under the cheek while grasping the leg above the knee and repositioning it (Figures 2 and 2a).

Remember, the animal should always be between the exhibitor and the judge. In the case of setting the right rear leg, with the judge on the right, the exhibitor should hold the animal in the left hand (under the chin) and reach over the top of the rump and grasp the leg about the hock (Figure 3). If the animal is too large for the exhibitor, he/she may want to reach under the animal to place the leg (Figure 3a). In the case of the left rear leg, use the right hand to move the leg (Figure 4). The exhibitor may also place the rear legs by pushing or pulling gently toward or away from the leg out of position, using the same cheek grasp described earlier. Although this is an effective method for placing the rear feet, it does not appeal to the majority of judges and should only be used when all else fails or when showing large breed animals.

When the judge approaches the rear of the animal to handle it, the exhibitor should maintain the same grasp at the cheeks.



Figure 1. Posing animal with judge viewing from the rear.



Figure 1a. Position when judge approaches the animal for handling.

The exhibitor should not drop to his knees or thrust a knee against the animal's breast. A slight bending of the exhibitor's knees and a push downward on back on the animal's head will serve to control it (Figure 5). The main idea here is to make the sheep firm up, but at the same time keep the animal from fighting, chocking, or backing up. If you have practiced bracing you sheep, it will push forward, thus tensing the muscles in the loin and leg. It is important that the exhibitor keep the sheep's feet on the ground at this time. DO NOT lift the front feet when the judge handles your animal.

When the judge views the animal from its right side, the exhibitor should be kneeling or squatting on the left side near the animal's head, but not against it. The exhibitor's left hand should be under the animal's jaw, well out toward the muzzle, with the



Figure 2. Placing animal's right front leg.



Figure 2a. Placing animal's left front leg.



Figure 3. Placing right rear leg.



Figure 3a. Another technique for placing the right rear leg.



Figure 4. Placing the left rear leg.



Figure 5. Bracing the sheep for handling.

arm fairly extended. The right hand should be gently rubbing underneath the animal's belly. This serves to raise a sagging back and to calm the animal as well as the exhibitor (Figure 6). Also, the animal's head should be at a normal level, not too high or too low.

When the judge moves to the front of the animal, the exhibitor should remain by the animal's left shoulder. Avoid moving too far to the rear of the animal and stretching out at arm's length. When the exhibitor's left arm is extended, it should be at an angle, going more back toward the rear of the animal rather than directly out to the side. If the animal has changed its front leg position, the exhibitor should reset the legs. Do not worry too much about hind feet being slightly out of position as the judge is concerned with the front end of the animal. If the animal tends to be startled by someone approaching, it may be a good idea for the exhibitor to place his/her right hand on the back of the animal's neck to ensure control. If it appears that the judge is going to ask a question, the exhibitor should move closer to his animal and stand near enough so that he/she can hear the instructions.

When the judge moves from the head-on view to the left side of the animal, the exhibitor is correct in moving between the judge and his/her animal to the opposite or right side. This movement should be made when the judge has passed the exact front of the animal and needs a clear view of the animal's left side (Figure 7). The exhibitor's movement should always be slow, natural, and graceful. The exhibitor should make this movement around his/her animal's front end. He/she is often in danger of losing control of the animal by attempting to stretch around the rear and is off balance stepping over his/her animal's back. Therefore, movement around the animal should always be made in front of the animal. The exhibitor accomplishes this by standing with both hands on the animal's chin (Figure 8).

When the judge asks the exhibitor to move his/her animal, the exhibitor should be on the opposite side of the animal from the judge. If the exhibitor is on the animal's left side, the exhibitor should have his/her left hand under the animal's chin, well

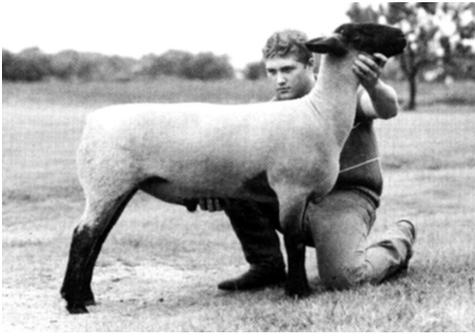


Figure 6. Proper position of exhibitor and animal for a side view.

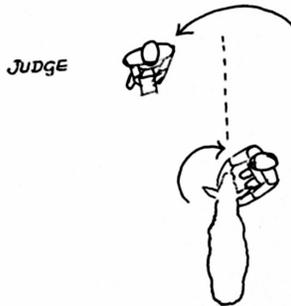


Figure 7. Movement of exhibitor from one side of the animal to the other side.



Figure 8. Position of arms when changing sides of animal.

out toward the muzzle, so as to avoid choking the animal. The exhibitor should have the fingers of his/her right hand closed and cupped under the animal's dock (Figure 9).

Never grasp the wool with an open-fingered hand at any time. While it is fairly "showy" to move the animal without touching its dock, this often results in a loss of control by the exhibitor. The animal should move at a fairly slow and even pace, with its back level and its head in a normal position. The exhibitor should always strive to walk in a straight line and avoid pushing the animal from side to side.

When the judge requires the animal to be walked, turn and returned to the line-up, the exhibitor should turn the animal's head inward so that the head remains close to the exhibitor's



Figure 9. Maneuvering an animal by the dock.

belt. Simply change hands under the chin and reverse the animal while staying at the animal's head. By turning the head inward, you reduce the possibility of the animal bolting away. For the return trip, the exhibitor will end up on the opposite side of the animal from the judge (Figure 10). Upon returning to the line-up, the exhibitor should immediately place the animal in position.

When the class has been lined up with the animals facing away from the judge, exhibitors should be careful to space their animals one full body length apart. The exhibitors to the left of the judge should stay on the left side of their animal while the exhibitors on the judge's right are on the right side of their animal (Figure 11). Again, this follows the guideline of keeping the animal between the judge and the exhibitor. Figure 12 shows the proper position of the exhibitors when the judge is to the front of the animals.

When the judge requests a side view, it is important that the exhibitors keep their animals in a straight head-to-tail line. This allows the judge to have a full side view of each animal (Figure 13).

In the line, or at any time that the animal is being viewed by the judge, calmness and control by the exhibitor are far more important than showy gesturing and arm's length posing, which may allow the animal to bolt loose. The exhibitor should watch the position of the animal more than he/she watches the judge. Keep the animal "showing" at all times without excitement or overreactions.

If the animal should bolt away, the exhibitor should follow the animal as quietly as possible to a corner and haze and catch it quietly. The best catch is under the chin or in the rear flank. As soon as the animal is caught, the exhibitor should lift its head up so that the animal cannot bolt so easily. The use of a halter may be necessary for some young or inexperienced exhibitors.

The showman should be prepared to answer question asked by the judge such as breed, age, sex, and weight of the animal. Knowledge of grooming equipment and skill in the use of equipment are very crucial showmanship "skills." The exhibitor should also be familiar with grooming techniques for this particular breed, and he/she should be ready to explain why he/she trimmed the animal a particular way.

Summary

After the show is over, the showman should congratulate the other exhibitors and express his/her appreciation to the judge, regardless of how he/she was placed. Everyone appreciates good sportsmanship. A good showman should make up his/her mind



Figure 10. Returning an animal to the line-up.

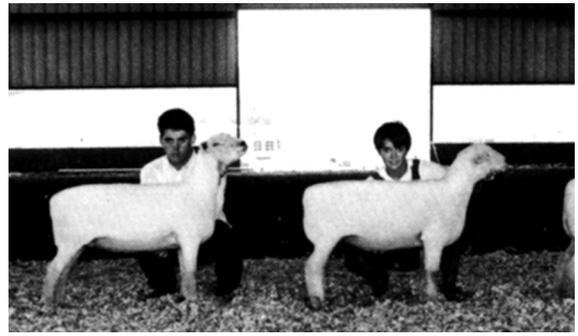


Figure 13. Proper position of exhibitors and animals in a line-up for a side view.



Figure 11. Proper position of exhibitors when judge is to the rear of the animal.



Figure 12. Position of the exhibitors when the judge is in front of the animals.

to return the next year with a better animal and to do a better job.

Every exhibitor should remember that showmanship skills are developed through long hours of practice, hard work, and a desire to accomplish a goal. An exhibitor can improve his/her skills and abilities through practice and by observing the outstanding showmen groom and show their animals.

A showman should try to win; however, the primary goal is to present your animal so that it will make the best impression possible on the judge. You can achieve this objective through developing showmanship skills and in striving to improve those skills. Exhibiting livestock provides you with an opportunity to develop important personal traits such as self-discipline and a sense of responsibility.

Credits

Joe Hughes, Extension 4-H Livestock Specialist, and Bill Crutcher, Purebred Flock manager, Oklahoma State University, edited this publication. Karen C. Steele prepared the original text.

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