Basic Tips for First Time Prospect Steer Selection

Are You Ready To Select Your Show Steer? These are the words that could strike fear into the heart of someone who has no experience with cattle, let alone choosing a beef project animal for their youth. However, you should not feel bad because you are not alone!

The most important thing to remember when looking for your 4-H project animal is that first and foremost, you want your youth to be safe, feel good about the work they are doing, and you want them to take away knowledge from the project that they can build on. This knowledge will stay with your youth long after their project is over, and will carry over into their adult life as well.

How Do You Get Started? Whether you are a beginner, or a seasoned veteran of beef exhibition, you will find that a little research goes a long way! First you need to determine what breed you are attracted to, and whether or not that breed is suited to your geography (climate, feed availability, etc.), and most importantly, the skill level of your youth. Winning is wonderful, but the safety and self-confidence of your youth depends on the animal. Young and/or inexperienced exhibitors should be paired with breeds that are generally known for being docile and easy to manage such as an Angus/Angus X or Hereford/Hereford X, just to name a couple. However, no matter what the genetics, they are still animals with their own mind and you can’t read it! Once you have answered these questions, you can begin your search.

Seek Out Advice. Most competitors will agree that if you don’t raise your own animals, that it is imperative to have contacts, or someone who can guide you in searching for your 4-H project animal. If you are in an area where beef cattle are raised and known for producing exhibition animals, it is a good idea to make contact with these producers and ask for a visit. You should also contact your 4-H professional if you have questions or need help.

Know What the Market Is Looking For. If you have ever listened to a Show Judge make comments about the animals as he sorts through the class and places them, you have probably heard some important terms used that describe the traits that a particular animal exhibits or
lacks. These are industry terms for production and marketing. Some of these important terms include:

- **Carcass Quality** – color, texture, and firmness of the meat in the rib eye area; Ratings are Prime, Choice, Select and Standard
- **Quality Grade** – tastefulness, flavor and juiciness of the meat
- **Yield Grade** – percent yield of four prime cuts of beef: chuck, rib, loin and round, also known as cutability
- **Frame** – choose a frame that will allow for correct amount of finish within your feeding period (days on feed). *Large framed* animals require a longer time to finish, and may not have enough finish at the time of their terminal show to make the Choice quality grade. A *small framed* steer may fatten too soon, and will have a poor yield grade. Look for a *moderate framed* steer that will finish between 1100 and 1250 pounds at their terminal show.
- **Muscling** – Look for a moderately muscled steer in order to have a good yield grade. Too much muscle may lead to poor marbling and a poor quality grade.
- **Temperament** – Look for animals, especially for beginners that are known for being docile and easy to work with. *No one breed is fool proof and there are NEVER any guarantees.
- **Mothering Ability (females)** – Animals known for having good milk capacity. This is especially important when selecting females that you would want to put into your own herd.

**Know Something About the Breeds.** As mentioned earlier, most breeds have something about them that attracts you to them. The following is a short list of breeds common to Florida shows, and some of the descriptive terms regarding those breeds, that you may find useful when selecting your project animal:

- **Angus** – carcass quality, mothering ability, docility
- **Brahman** – heavy muscling, large frame, insect and heat resistance
- **Charolais** – larger frame
- **Gelbvieh** – carcass quality
- **Hereford** – mothering, docility and range feeding
- **Limousin** – larger frame, muscling, increased percentage of cutability
- **Maine Anjou** – larger frame, finishing ability
- **Simmental** – mothering and beef production
- **Shorthorn** – carcass quality and hair growth
**Involve Your Youth In the Selection.** Whether this is your first project or you are a seasoned veteran of the ring, it is important that the youth who will be working with the animal, have some part in the selection of the project animal. Often we don’t give enough credit to our youth when it comes to matters of selecting an animal that will cost hundreds, if not thousands of dollars. Many youth develop a keen eye for selecting animals at a very early age, so it is important to allow them to develop that natural ability. These skills are enhanced when youth participate in judging activities.

**Record Keeping.** Make sure to keep good records. There are 4-H Record Books and resource books available for all project areas. Your 4-H Agent and Club Leader will assist you in obtaining the proper materials.

**Facilities, Feed, Nutrition, Health, Breaking, Training and Showmanship.** All of these topics will be covered in the upcoming weeks.

**Don’t Lose Sight.** Exhibiting cattle is no different than any competitive sport, when it comes to the desire to win. However, it is important to remember that above all else, beef projects afford you the opportunity to do things together as a family. Remember too, that yes you are out there to win, but winning is not everything. At the end of the day, a competition is one man or woman’s opinion and not everyone can win. However, when your youth leaves the ring, whether with a blue ribbon, or last place, help them to look at their work and realize the value of that work and the life lessons that they will take home. Help them to build on that experience and carry it into their next show season. Realizing the value of their work will last longer than that blue ribbon, and will be worth much more.

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