

Carolyn Thomas Lavishes Attention On Hogs, Reaps Rewards

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STEWARTSTOWN — Carolyn Thomas has a philosophy about pigs.

"A pig is a lot like a dog," she observes. "I guess they just like attention."

This Stewartstown farm woman should know. She has worked with pigs for many years and currently handles the bulk of the day-to-day chores for about 150 hogs, including 26 sows and three boars.

Carolyn and her husband, Charlie, maintain a herd of purebred Hampshires and a few Durocs, plus feed out market hogs on the former Sechrist Auction farm they acquired nine years ago. Although the barn was set up for limited hog production, the Thomas' have remodeled and expanded to accommodate their present hog numbers.

For the last several years, the couple has taken to the local show circuit in both breeding and market classes. The wrapup of the recent Farm Show Hampshire competition marked a high point for Carolyn in her hog-exhibiting career as one of her February gilts claimed the grand champion ribbons over a lineup of contenders.

The champion, Bam Kaw-Li-Ga 4-4, was one of five of the Thomas' homebreds in the Farm Show's Hampshire February gilt class. In addition to the first place win, Carolyn took the fourth through seventh places out of ten, two of those with substitutions for her original March class entries. She also claimed the third award in the January age category.

In the followup Farm Show hog sale, Carolyn's champion gilt brought spirited bidding. Holding out to the end for a price of \$1,025, was buyer William Hilty of Mt. Pleasant.

"And we went with no intentions of even getting fourth," chuckles this pleased Hampshire hog enthusiast.

The fancy black hogs with the broad whitish-pink stripe around

their middles reign for a reason on the Thomas farm.

"Hamps usually top the carcass classes," confirms Carolyn, citing several examples. "They're a better meat-type hog."

But the Thomas' didn't originally start with Hampshires. Their beginning batch of gilts were saved from the first group of feeder pigs and were a "mix of everything," from Landrace to Spots to Polands. A Hamp boar brought in proved to be a non-breeder, and was replaced with a Berkshire.

"We had baby pigs of all colors," Carolyn remembers.

Foundation stock for some of the present bloodlines trace back to two Hamp purebred gilts and a boar from a Maryland breeder, and a bred gilt Charlie bought at a Farm Show sale for Carolyn's birthday. Two Duroc gilts and a Duroc boar vary the hog pen "color scheme" and add to crossbreeding options for market pigs.

Already, Carolyn is looking ahead to the fall shows with pure and crossbred litters for market classes from farrowings over the next two months. She's been especially successful in carcass class competition.

At the 1986 Keystone International Livestock Exposition at Harrisburg, her Hampshire barrow topped the heavyweight class. In the carcass judging that followed, it placed third over all breeds, from a total of 247 entries. Loin eye of that third-place overall winner was 6.3 inches, second only to the 7.4 loin eye scored by the carcass champion. With a length of 31.5 inches, the back fat of .8, the carcass on the rail totaled 92.91 pounds, and acceptability of 58.07 percent of the slaughter weight.

York Fair usually brings more awards for Thomas hogs, including at least one carcass class champion in past years. During the 1986 York contest, entrants judged the carcass class. Carolyn claimed second honors in judging, while her Hamp entry scored sixth on foot



Carolyn Thomas and her husband, Charlie, put the finishing touches on their Farm Show champion Hampshire gilt, homebred Bam Ka-Li-Ga 4-4.

and fourth on the rail.

Both Carolyn and Charlie are becoming accomplished judges, and Carolyn has topped heavy national competition in type judging. A first-place finish in ringside show and carcass judging at KILE earned Charlie a \$50 prize a few years ago.

Some of the Thomas' success with hogs begins, according to Carolyn, in the living room of their comfortable farm home. There, Charlie studies hog industry publications, trends, and bloodlines, and plans most of the crosses before he and Carolyn hand breed their sows.

"Make sure Charlie gets some credit for this," insists Carolyn of her husband who is employed full time by AMP, Inc. "He really wants me to do this."

Farrowing season is hectic, but enjoyable for Carolyn, who says that she really looks forward to seeing what each litter of piglets looks like.

Near their due date, sows are moved into the Thomas' unique farrowing house. The hexagon-shaped building originated as a package unit from a Nebraska firm and had been converted for a veal calf use when Carolyn and Charlie purchased the farm. They insulated and remodeled it into a six-unit farrowing facility. Each unit is a pie-wedge shape, with individual waterers, safety rails, and a heat unit and creep feeder



Her flock of 100 heavy layers keeps Carolyn and friends well supplied with brown eggs.

with pallet trough at the center to supply all six pens. Because the watering units have shallow drinking bowls, baby pigs find water and learn to drink it when they are just hours old, a definite advantage to their well-being. Carolyn is convinced.

Between farrowing seasons, the pens are scrubbed down and disinfected, part of the Thomas' strict adherence to sanitation measures to hold down exposure of their breeding stock to disease.

Baby pigs are started on a Master Mix pallet, but only when they're ready for solid feed.

"I don't even put feed there for them for three weeks," Carolyn explains. "When they're ready to eat, I want them to have fresh feed, not feed with dust and dirt in it."

Occasionally, a litter may include a weak or extra small pig which gets hand-feeding attention from Carolyn. For that purpose, a special supplement she calls "chocolate milk" is kept on hand.

Calling a teaspoon a "must" in the farrowing house, Carolyn takes tiny portions of the booster liquid or strips of milk from the sow and spoons it into a newborn's mouth. Using her little finger, she teaches

the piglets to suck and swallow the fluid, and continues to feed them in that manner until they are able to drink from a shallow can.

Of course, a hand-raised pig can form a special attachment to its source of sustenance. One 200-pound hog thus saved still shows affection for Carolyn when she comes in the pen by rubbing at her leg.

"But you can't give 150 pigs individual attention," she grins.

Sows with questionable temperament are weeded out of the Thomas' herd in a hurry, since Carolyn does most of the day-to-day caring for them. Even the most trustworthy, however, may sometimes turn on a caregiver when baby pigs come into the picture.

Carolyn still carries marks on her leg where a testy mother bit her repeatedly one day last year. Fortunately, she was wearing several layers of clothing, which the sow's sharp teeth were mostly unable to penetrate. But the biting attack left large bruises for many weeks; and, one sow which could never again be trusted went out the road.

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Homestead Notes



Carolyn is well-pleased with the success of their insulated, hexagon-styled farrowing unit. The six, wedge-shaped individual pens feature automatic waterers safety rails and creep-feeding for pigs.