

Farm Show Competition Means More Than Ribbons For Stoltzfus Family

LOU ANN GOOD

Lancaster Farming Staff

ELIZABETHTOWN (Lancaster Co.) — After months of conditioning her steers and exercising her Dorsets, 16-year-old Jessica Stoltzfus will find out how her pampered pets compare with others across the state at the Pennsylvania Farm Show.

"I'm a perfectionist and my standards get higher and higher every year," said this Farm Show veteran.

Nonetheless, she knows that even if you put forth your best effort, you don't always win.

"Sportsmanship is all about losing gracefully. It's part of life. You don't always get what you deserve," said Jessica's older brother Jason, who showed livestock 11 years at county and state levels.

As a college sophomore, Jason won't be competing at Farm Show, but he does hope to slip away from nearby Messiah College for a few hours to help Jessica with the behind-the-scenes work of having animals at the Farm Show.

While Jessica has always been partial to sheep and has been known to fall asleep with them in the pen, that doesn't mean she doesn't become attached to her steers.

"I try hard not to, but I get all choked up when it's time to sell them," she said.

The whole Stoltzfus family has been involved in the 4-H program for at least 11 years.

The siblings' dad Frank was involved in showing animals through 4-H and FFA when he was young.

Although his wife Irene raised sheep during her growing up years, she never participated in competition.

Frank said of the reason he pushed to have his children become involved in showing animals was from his own experience. "I knew what farm youth clubs could do because FFA and 4-H were a good influence on me. I think farm kids get a good meaning of what it means to work for a living. They see the production end unlike many others because most jobs are service and not production."

Jessica agrees with her dad's assessment. She said, "It's nice to live on a farm. It's taught me responsibility even though I get tired of it sometimes, I still need to get it done."

Responsibility is often learned through mistakes. Jessica said that she had all the forms filled out to enter KILE this year, but forgot to mail the forms until the deadline was past.

"If you don't take care of it, you pay for it later," she said of her disappointment in missing the deadline.

For 11 years, the Stoltzfuses live on the grounds of Masonic Homes in E-town, where Frank is a production supervisor for 1,450 acres, 120 milking cows, 100-head of beef, and the 150-sow farrow-to-finish operation. Since rules prohibit raising personal animals on the Masonic Farm grounds, eight years ago the Stoltzfuses purchased a 9-acre farm about three miles from where they live.

On their Oak Meadows Farm, they have a 1,500-head finishing hog unit. They converted the two-story chicken house on the property into a sheep barn where they

raise about 27 ewes and rams. During the lambing season, the number increases by about 30 head.

Irene is primarily responsible for the hog finishing care. The family previously contracted hogs, but now are independent.

With this past year's high corn prices, Frank figures that they ended up with about as much profit as if they had been under contract. "But the potential for higher profit is there if we stick in it for the long run," he said.

Not living where they raise their animals causes some difficulty during bad weather. Last year the family used a snowmobile to reach the farm. The tenants at the farm also fed the animals during the height of the storm.

The Stoltzfus family got involved in sheep raising before their children were old enough to join 4-H. When Jason was 4 or 5 years old, his grandmother gave him two lambs. At that time, the family lived on the family's Elverston farm in Chester County. At first they kept the lambs tied to a cinder block, which could be easily moved from spot to spot. Later, they purchased about 10 ewes to keep the pasture trimmed.

Through the years, the family has bred their own sheep and have had success with the Dorset breed.

"Dorsets make good mammas," Jessica said.

Her mother oversees most of the birthing during the lambing season, but she isn't one to spend nights in the barn like some people do. "I may do a barn check late at night before going to bed, but mostly the ewes have no problems unlike some other breeds," Irene said.

The sheep have access to a three-sided building for shelter while pasturing, but Irene prefers to herd the ewes into the barn before birthing. That doesn't always work out. But the ewes' mothering skills and hardy lambs do well regardless of where birthing takes place.

Lambing season is due to start during Farm Show week, which makes it a hectic time for the family.

While some peers remember the Blizzard of '96 during Farm Show with fondness, Jessica is one of those people who do not. Although she was in a hotel not far from the Farm Show, they were snowed in so badly that they couldn't get out. It took her dad 2½ hours walking through waist-high snow to reach the Farm Show Complex. Jessica and others stranded at the hotel couldn't get there until the following day. In the meantime, hotel guests were entertained by the steer that Jessica attempted to unload from the snowed-under trailer in the hotel parking lot.

"One thing was good about last year," Jessica said of the sparsely attended show after the snowstorm. "No one was in the way. It made it easier for me to run back and forth between the steer and sheep shows."

For months the sheep have been roughly fitted for showing in what is called "slick shear" and "patch shear." This involves shearing out sections and allowing wool to grow where more wool is needed for showing the sheep to its fullest potential. The sheep are slick sheared six weeks in advance of the show and later patch sheared so that other than washing and blending the wool through carding



The Stoltzfus family pose with one of Jessica's Dorset. From left are Jason, Irene, Jessica, and Frank. While the goal is to earn a trophy in livestock competition, Jessica knows that putting forth her best effort doesn't guarantee a win. "You don't always get what you think you deserve, but sportsmanship is all about losing gracefully," Jason said.



Jessica feeds her flock of Dorset ewes at their Elizabethtown farm. Although the family operates a 1,500-head hog finishing unit, they do not show hogs, but prefer to stick to steers and sheep.

before the show, little is required.

"The older we get, the better we get," Jessica said of Jason's and her fitting skills. "When we look at old pictures, we can see our sheep weren't (fitted) too good."

Jessica is accustomed to peers and strangers often commenting on the whiteness and cleanliness of her sheep. This past year, she felt embarrassed when she rushed home from the Keystone International Livestock Expositi-

tion (KILE) to enter them in Mannheim Farm Show.

"I thought my sheep looked dirty and I was so embarrassed," Jessica said.

Regardless, the sheep were selected as champions over all breeds. Although proud to win the honor and hold the banner while the media snapped pictures, Jessica felt embarrassed that her sheep didn't meet her showy cleanliness standards.

The two steers that Jessica is raising are an Angus and a Maine-Anjou. In addition to competing in the steer show at the state Farm Show, Jessica will be showing market lambs in youth competition and two ewes in the breeding show.

Jason sold his Suffolk flock to his parents when he left for college. His parents decided not to