

Tracy Family Keeps Their Fingers Crossed

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ELIZABETHTOWN (Lancaster Co.) — Like hundreds of other exhibitors, Ryan and John Tracy are hoping to take top ribbons at the Pennsylvania Farm Show during the next few days. The two brothers each have a market lamb and a carcass lamb to enter in competition. They will also participate in showmanship.

"No matter how good the sheep look," their dad said, "we always keep our fingers crossed."

Last year, one week before Farm Show, 13 of the Tracys' sheep were killed by stray dogs. The dogs were not tracked down. A woodlot with hundreds of acres lies adjacent to the sheep barn.

A month after the attack, the Tracys purchased a donkey. Donkeys are said to be aggressive in scaring off dogs.

"We haven't had any trouble since then," Tracy said. "I don't know if it's because of the donkey or a coincidence."

If the Tracy name has a familiar ring, it may be because Ryan's and John's 22-year-old brother Mark has been showing sheep since he was six years old. Although Mark is no longer eligible to compete, his interest in sheep is intact. Home from college for the holidays, Mark said, "I like to see how the lambs progress and I like to watch competitions."

Mark is enrolled at Penn State main campus studying animal science, but is considering switching to art education.

All three brothers have left a significant mark on showing at the local level. It's tougher at state competition, but Mark showed the middleweight champion, a lightweight reserve champion, and the Southdown junior breeding sheep champion twice.

For Mark, it was the showmanship competition that he preferred. "I like the challenge," Mark said. Although he never took champion honors, he was happy to end up in the top five placings.

Mark has participated in many roles in the 4-H program. He worked as a summer intern in the Lancaster County 4-H office and was a state representative for 4-H ag business sponsored by Purina Mills.

To achieve the appointment by Purina State, Mark had to compete in a county-wide and in state competitions involving essays and interviews.

Mark met with ag industry leaders to discuss ag as a whole. He especially enjoyed learning about motivational techniques and plant and animal genetics and biotechnology.

"Every paper I wrote at college was about genetic engineering and biotechnology," he said.

Mark's brother Ryan will be joining him at Penn State in the fall. Ryan plans to study landscape architecture.

John is in the seventh grade at Elizabethtown Middle School.

Parents Helen and Gerald Tracy are staunch supporters of their sons' 4-H involvement. Helen serves as prime chauffeur, cheering section, and helps during lambing season.

Growing up Tracy was a 4-H member in York County where he participated in beef and swine clubs. It wasn't until after he was married and bought a few sheep that his interest in the breed was kindled.

In 1980, when the Tracys moved from Centre County to the Elizabethtown area, they had 60 ewes. The flock peaked in 1982 with 90-100 ewes, but has since been reduced to 30-35 head.

Mark began showing in open shows before he was old enough to participate in 4-H. At his first competition, he showed the supreme champion over all animals at the Elizabethtown Fair. This amazing feat was duplicated by brother Ryan in 1992.

When the Tracys first moved into the county, Tracy was farm manager for Masonic Homes, a long term health care and retirement facility for Masonic Lodge masons and their families.

With 1,405 acres, Tracy oversees the farm crop program, dairy, beef, swine, and orchard operations. Since then, Tracy has been appointed director of environmental services and land manager. In addition to the farm operation, Tracy also oversees housekeeping, healthcare, and more than 900 staff people.

Of the beauty of the grounds and



The Tracy family will participate in sheep competition again at the Pennsylvania Farm Show. From left, parents Gerald and Helen Tracy with sons Ryan, John, and Mark.

the opportunities of Masonic Homes, Tracy said, "The worse day I ever had here is better than the best day I ever had working elsewhere."

Although the Tracys live on the grounds, they keep their livestock at their 40-acre farm located one mile from their home.

In addition to breeding sheep for their own use, the Tracys also sell sheep to other 4-H members.

Although they generally show the sheep they breed, at times they purchase some if they don't have the right lamb size and weight for competitions.

"We try to gear the sheep to peak at the right time, but sometimes it doesn't work out," Tracy said.

"We have had equal success with home-bred and purchased sheep," Tracy said. "Both were homebred lambs that won their classes at Farm Show last year."

The Tracys noted they don't have any trade secrets to share

about raising lambs. "We weigh routinely to monitor and adjust weight. We use a basic corn ration, feed oats if too fat, and add corn if not finished."

Several weeks before a show, the sheep are given added exercise to firm them up.

In 1980, Mark showed the middleweight champion in market lamb competition at Farm Show. In 1990, Mark showed the reserve champion at Farm Show, and the following year the champion. In 1997, each of the brothers had a first in the class.

In 1993, Ryan was the novice showmanship winner. In 1991 he showed the champion lightweight market lamb.

This year has been a great year for John. He showed the 4-H Roundup market lamb champion and with the same lamb at Elizabethtown Fair took the reserve champion sale lamb title.

Naturally as the youngest of

three brothers, John wants to do as well or outdo his brothers' accomplishments. He said, "I really want to get supreme champion at E-town," he said.

"Four-H was a good experience for me," Tracy said. It was his 4-H experience that prompted him to go to college and pursue an agricultural career. Tracy continues to participate by serving as a 4-H leader in the county Woolies Club.

"The county 4-H has a fantastic program. I can't say enough good about Chet (Hughes), livestock agent, and the excellent extension staff," Tracy said.

His three sons are also members of Demolay, a Masonic youth fraternity that provides recreational and community activities. All three have served as altar boys and participated in either soccer or football.

Ryan traded soccer for football when he was in 10th grade. He

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Gerald is both dad and 4-H leader for sons gives Ryan and John. Here, he gives them some pointers while they prepare their sheep for Farm Show competition. In the background are the Angus and Shorthorn steers they raise.



In addition to showing sheep, the brothers share artistic talent.