

Youth and Adults – Learning From Each Other

What makes learning fun for Jersey youth? Start with a subject they love – Jersey cows. Add some friends with similar interests and a handful of knowledgeable adults. Top it off with a healthy dose of competition. Mix it all together and you’ve got a day full of fun and an educated group of young Jersey people.

This was the recipe that led to the success of the first Jersey Youth Challenge, held at Van De Jerseys, Transfer, Pa., in conjunction with the AJCA-NAJ Annual Meetings this past June.

At the event, a group of over 40 young people, ranging in ages from three to 19, learned type appraisal and sire selection skills from dairy industry leaders and applied their knowledge in competitions as individuals and teams.

They left the Jersey Youth Challenge armed with tools that will help them better manage their growing Jersey herds, a new set of friends and increased confi-

dence in their ability to make decisions and defend their opinions.

The Competitions

The Jersey Youth Challenge is the brainchild of AJCA-NAJ Annual Meeting Co-Chair, David Greathouse, Sandy Lake, Pa. Greathouse, who is a member of the AJCA Type Advisory Committee, thought the junior program would be the ideal venue to explain the importance of type evaluation and sire selection to the dairy business.

Putting the idea to practice with Greathouse was a host of Pennsylvania Jersey breeders and Cari Wolfe, AJCA’s Director of Research and Genetic Development.

The event was organized into two sessions: one session explained the type appraisal program and another explained the sire selection process. Each started with a lesson and was followed by a competition with prizes.

Under the direction of Ron Mosser, an appraiser with the AJCA, youth learned how to evaluate five linear type traits.

Mosser showed them how to measure rear udder width, rear udder height, udder depth, front teat placement and foot angle using a ruler or protractor and apply the measurement to a 50-point linear scale. He also explained the importance of each trait to the productive life of the Jersey cow.

“The program gave youth a better understanding of the type appraisal program and its importance to the breed,” said Dr. John C. Wilk, Raleigh, N.C., a member of the AJCA Research Committee and past director of the organization.

Juniors then set out on their own to measure the traits on three Van De Jersey cows and assign a score to each trait for each cow.

The concept is similar to a judging contest, of which many juniors are familiar, but has greater application to on-farm management, explained Greathouse.

“The appraisal workshop was meaningful because it was hands-on,” said Renee Norman, Liberty, Pa., a junior who helped with the event and placed seventh in this year’s Youth Achievement Contest. “Because juniors had opportunity to measure traits on their own, it was possible for them to really notice the differences among the cows and see what is most desirable.”

With the top five juniors averaging just three points from Mosser’s official scoring, “it was obvious that they learned well,” Dr. Wilk commented.

Jeff Ziegler, Sire Analyst for Select Sires, started the second session by explaining the role of a sire analyst and giv-



Ron Mosser, an appraiser with the AJCA, shows juniors how to evaluate functional type traits and explains their importance to longevity and profitability.



Jeff Ziegler, Sire Analyst for Select Sires, explains the role of a sire analyst in the sire-proving process, while Cari Wolfe, Director of Research and Development for the AJCA, looks on.

The team of Vinny Endres, Wisc.; Brandon Kozak, Ohio; Alex Steer, Tenn.; Kyle Schirm, Ohio; and Olivia Pearson, N.C., defends their young sire choice to a panel of sire analysts.





The panel of judges for the junior sire-appraiser teams included Greg Topp, Accelerated Genetics; Angie Coburn, Genex/CRI; Tara Bohnert, Alta Genetics; Dick Smith, ABS Global; and Jeff Ziegler, Select Sires.

ing a timeline for bulls as they travel through the proving process.

Ziegler showed juniors the significant elements of a performance pedigree and spoke on the value of listening to Jersey breeders when selecting young bulls.

“The most important information is not only what’s on that piece of paper,” he commented. “You’ve also got to listen to what the breeders want and the direction they want to take their herds.”

Juniors were then assigned the task of becoming sire analysts on their own. They were split into eight teams and directed to select one bull to sample from a group of 12, all with very different pedigrees. Adult volunteers helped lead the groups to discuss breeding objectives, select a bull and list reasons for their selection.

Teams worked together to select the bull most suited to their needs. In reaching a consensus, they answered a number of questions. What is important in the cows we develop? What kind of milk market do we have? Are there special, breed-wide challenges that need to be improved?

“Each team member came to the group with what they thought to be the most important traits in choosing a bull,” commented Elaine Noble, Gillett, Pa., who led one of the teams.

“Everyone in the group had their opinions on type versus production,” she continued. “They literally decided amongst themselves that both were important and tried to balance them when they chose the bull. We also had a youth in our group who was concerned with inbreeding and they tried to measure that in their selection as well.”

“One of the oldest youth in my group taught the whole group about yield deviations and why they are important to him,”

Noble added. “That was great because I feel the others will take that more to heart than had I shown them.”

Teams then gave an oral presentation to a panel of sire analysts from five A.I. organizations to explain the reasons for their selection.

“The great part of the event was that there was no right or wrong pedigree to pick out,” said panel member, Tara Bohnert, Jersey Specialist for Alta Genetics. “All the bulls had already made it into A.I.”

Bohnert, who is a product of the Jersey Youth programs and a former National Jersey Queen, Youth Achievement Winner and recipient of the Fred Stout Experience, con-

also made new friends and learned about dairy operations other than their own.

“One of highlights for me was watching youth of all ages interacting together,” commented Noble. “In my group, two came from the northeast, two from the west coast and one from the southeast. All came from different types of operations, ranging from small to large, and from primarily commercial to homebred, registered herds. It was fascinating that everyone, especially me, learned something very valuable, not only about the Jersey cow, but about each other’s regions and types of operations.”

As well, juniors learned how to defend their opinions and became comfortable visiting and working one-on-one with respected leaders in the dairy industry.

“While some of the kids were a little more bashful than others, by the end of the day, they were all asking questions and sharing the priorities set in their family’s operations,” Noble added.

“It could be pretty intimidating for many young people to stand in front of a panel of five adults, but the poise shown by kids of all ages was overwhelming,” remarked Angie Coburn, Dairy Procurement Specialist for Genex Cooperative and a member of the sire-analyst panel. “There should be a lot of proud parents in the Jersey breed.”

The Value

“The youth program is an important part of the AJCA-NAJ Annual Meetings,” commented Dr. Wilk. The organization takes great pride in its youth, even going so far as to fund youth programs each year through proceeds from the National Heifer Sale.

“We have some very sharp junior members,” remarked Greathouse. “The Jersey Youth Challenge gave them opportunity to show the adults what they can do.”

As well, the first Jersey Youth Challenge exposed youth to an entirely new part of the Jersey industry, said Coburn.

“I hope young people are able to see just how useful all the information they learned will be and how often they will use it in the future,” commented Norman.

In a comment fitting the enthusiasm felt by all, Ziegler said, “I’m sure the future president of the AJCA and my replacement in running Select Sires’ Jersey programs in 2028 was among the group.”



Youth placing in the type appraisal competition were Rita Day, N.M., third senior division; Dore Baker, N.Y., third junior division; Tess Martin, Ore., second senior division; Abby Stroup, Calif., first senior division; and Michael Stroup, Calif., first junior division. Missing from photo are (junior division) Cassie Chittenden, N.Y., second; Olivia Pearson, N.C., fourth; Courtney Kozak, Ohio, fifth; (senior division) Brittany Lantzky, Iowa, fourth; and Nathan Kenny, Pa., fifth.



The winning team in the sire-analyst competition consisted of Kate Rector, Calif.; Tess Martin, Ore.; Adult Leader, Chris Curtis, Pa.; Mandy Lutz, N.C.; and Courtney Kozak, Ohio. Out of camera are Charlie Moyer, Pa.; and Meagan Chittenden, N.Y.

tinued. “The kids just had to defend their criteria and selection. And the element of competition drove them to try their best.”

The Lessons

Often, the most valuable lessons learned are not measurable skills, however. Juniors