

# Unethical Fitting and Showing Practices in Junior Livestock Shows

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## ABSTRACT

This study was done to determine the extent of fraudulent fitting and showing practices used by exhibitors in junior livestock shows in Texas. To obtain this information, a survey form was mailed to junior exhibitors at the 1990 Houston Livestock Show and Rodeo, to agricultural science teachers in Areas III, V and VI and to county extension agents in Districts 4 and 5. More students enter state livestock shows through the county extension 4-H program than through high school FFA chapters. Agricultural science teachers visit their students and projects more frequently than county extension agents. About 25% of those surveyed had knowingly used illegal drugs in preparing market animals for show ring competition while approximately 47% had either registered crossbred animals or knew someone that did, and 37.5% were aware of falsification of data other than parentage on registration certificates. Recommendations to help eliminate fraudulent practices in fitting and showing livestock include limiting the amount of auction money paid to winners, stricter enforcement of existing rules, closer supervision of animal projects, increasing the percentage of show animals tested for drugs, body clipping market steers and establishing a "Livestock Hotline" for anonymous reporting of offenders to livestock offices.

Parents have encouraged their children to participate in 4-H or FFA activities because these organizations have long had the reputation for teaching leadership, regimentation, responsibility, and self-confidence. The exhibition of market animals in junior livestock shows over the last several years has become extremely competitive. Competition has become more intense as the amount of prize money has increased; in fact, grand champion animals are sold from \$35,000.00 to \$221,000.00 at major livestock shows in Texas. What was originally designed and intended to be a learning experience for youngsters has gradually become a quest for big money. Thus to a few, winning at any price has become the objective, and the values that were first considered so precious have been forgotten.

To gain a competitive edge to win with an animal, fraudulent practices have been employed, which include the use of illegal drugs and chemicals, physical alteration of natural color, falsification of registration certificates and using custom fitters to feed and prepare animals for show ring exhibition.

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The most highly publicized and most often implemented unethical fitting and/or showing practice is the use of illegal drugs and chemicals on the animals that are being exhibited. Tranquilizers, diuretics, and steroids are rather easily purchased and used by veteran exhibitors.

In discussing show ring ethics, animal breeders cannot be excluded. Their role has become important since the basic animal genotype is determined on the farm. Some purebred breeders have infused genes from exotic breeds into their herds to add bone, height and overall size and scale, but register the offspring as purebred. These calves will have distinct advantages in size, scale and bone over purebred calves at the livestock show.

Breeders also have falsified birth dates by as much as 180 days on calves. Reasons for this are obvious. A 16-month old heifer or bull competing in a class of 12-month old calves will appear to have grown faster, and will possess much more size and scale than other calves in the class.

Another recent controversial topic is use of the professional custom fitter. A fitter's job is to take a calf from the day of purchase, halter break, feed, train for the show ring, groom, and make the calf "show ready". The original purpose of student involvement in livestock shows was to teach certain basic values (responsibility, leadership, etc.). The custom fitter is the best example of completely bypassing the student's learning opportunities. The youngster seldom sees or has only limited involvement with the animal until show day.

The purpose of this study was to identify fraudulent fitting and showing practices and the extent of their use among a group of Houston Livestock Show and Rodeo exhibitors, parents, county extension agents and agricultural science teachers. Also, recommendations that may curtail or eliminate these practices will be proposed.

### **Merits of the Show Ring**

An important feature of the show ring is the opportunity it affords aspiring animal breeders to improve their stock, by presenting to them an ideal to work toward. The ideals established in the show ring by exhibition have a marked influence on the opinions and practices of breeders and permeate the field of agricultural education (Swett, 1941).

Competition in the junior livestock division at the major livestock shows in Texas has been limited to members of 4-H Clubs or FFA Chapters within the State Junior Livestock Show (Houston Livestock Show and Rodeo, 1989).

Participation in the show ring educates young people and helps them (1) set and meet goals, (2) become aware of profits and losses through record keeping activities, (3) achieve a higher level of self-esteem and (4) develop a sense of responsibility. Link (1990) suggests that showing beef cattle merely complements the overall education a youngster receives about the industry. The carcass contests, meats identification team and livestock judging team all help round out the experience.

### **Illegal Residues**

Just as the use of steroids by athletes brought scandal into the sports arena, cattlemen are increasingly calling attention to themselves in much the same way (Anderson, 1990). In this case, the illegal use of drugs is not in the feedlot, but rather in the show ring, where adverse publicity affects the entire industry.

In 1989, the Houston Livestock Show and Rodeo became the first organization of its kind to test show animals for the presence of drugs (Quarles, 1990, personal communication). According to Leroy Shafer, assistant general manager (1991, personal communication), seven animals auctioned during the 1991 Houston Livestock Show, including a breed reserve champion that sold for \$12,000, were disqualified and the money returned to the buyers because the animals tested positive for illegal drugs. These animals were exhibited by youngsters who had previously signed releases indicating they knew the use of drugs was not permitted. The reserve champion Southdown lamb's urine had residue of lasix, a diuretic commonly used to remove water from the body tissue of an animal. Shafer said, "The second drug found was acepromazine, a pain reliever typically used to reduce swelling in animals. If these drugs would have been found in a shipment of meat, the entire load would have been condemned and the owner fined or imprisoned."

Some livestock show officials are taking the responsibility to monitor some of these problems. Last year, at the request of show officials, the Texas Veterinary Medical Association began testing all first and second place animals exhibited at the San Antonio Livestock Exposition, Southwestern Exposition and Livestock Show in Ft. Worth, and the Houston Livestock Show and Rodeo (Anderson, 1990).

### Custom Fitters

Exhibitors who misuse drugs are also suspected of hiring professional fitters to care for and maintain their animals (Chriss, 1991). "There are some real masters," said Harlan Ritchie (1991, personal communication), a nationally recognized livestock judge from Michigan State University. Ritchie, who has seen the best of the custom fitters, said, "You're going to be influenced, I don't care how good you are. The professional fitter has the edge. They are as good as portrait artists. No matter how good you are at judging, its tough to see through them. They can take a good animal and make it great."

## METHODOLOGY

Data collection for this project began in May, 1990 with a series of personal interviews with the management staff of the Houston Livestock Show and Rodeo. As a result of these meetings a survey form was developed to determine the extent of fraudulent practices in junior livestock shows.

Three survey groups were specifically targeted: 1990 Houston Livestock Show junior market exhibitors and their parents, agricultural science teachers from areas III, V and VI and county extension agents from Districts 4 and 5. Respondents to the survey were guaranteed complete anonymity and all information provided was kept confidential.

Houston Livestock Show and Rodeo provided names and addresses of possible participants in each target group. The list of exhibitors was monitored to eliminate duplication. A total of 1,945 survey forms was mailed in October 1990 and a self-addressed, stamped return envelope was included to encourage participation.

The survey used (Exhibit 1) is presented below. The participants in the survey seemed quite eager to offer information, advice and suggestions, as well as criticisms and accusations. More than one-half included their names and addresses on the returned forms.

Exhibit 1. Questions from the survey instrument.

For each question, please circle all answers that apply.

1. YOUR/PRESENT INVOLVEMENT ...

Student Parent C.E.A. A.S.T. Custom Fitter Other \_\_\_\_\_

2. IF INVOLVED AS A STUDENT OR PARENT, DO YOU SHOW THROUGH 4-H OR FFA, OR BOTH? \_\_\_\_\_.

3. WHICH OF THE FOLLOWING SPECIES DO YOU EXHIBIT?

Cattle Swine Sheep

4. HOW OFTEN IS YOUR PROJECT SUPERVISED BY YOUR AG TEACHER OR COUNTY AGENT?

More than once per month Less than once per month  
Only once or twice Never

5. INDICATE ANY/ALL MEDICATIONS OR DRUGS USED IN THE PREPARATION AND EXHIBITION OF LIVESTOCK:

a. Steroids ... Equipoise Repository testosterone  
Proboloc Winstrol V Other

b. Tranquilizers ... Ace Promazine Thiamine  
Rompun Other \_\_\_\_\_

c. Diuretics ... Lasix Disal Other \_\_\_\_\_

d. Anthelmintics (wormers) ... Ivermectin Dichlorvos  
Levamisole Tramisol Other \_\_\_\_\_

e. Antibiotics ... Penicillin Combiotic LA200 Other \_\_\_\_\_

6. HAVE YOU EVER KNOWINGLY USED A DRUG OR MEDICATION ON AN ANIMAL THAT WAS CONSIDERED ILLEGAL BY THE LIVESTOCK SHOW INDUSTRY? YES NO

7. HAVE YOU OR OTHERS YOU KNOW USED CROSSBREEDING WITH REGISTERED STOCK (Angus x chi = Reg. Angus; Simmental x Hereford = Reg. Hereford)

Yes No Yourself Others

8. HAVE YOU OR OTHERS YOU KNOW EVER FALSIFIED REGISTRATION PAPERS ON ANIMALS?

YES NO YOURSELF OTHERS

IF SO, IN WHAT WAY?

Birthdates Breeding Parents Ownership Other \_\_\_\_\_

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A total of 797 responses were received for a 41% return. Numbers of respondents, by category (student, parent, teacher, agent), are presented in Table 1. Breakdown of student exhibitors by affiliation (FFA, 4-H) is presented in Table 2.

Table 1. Number of responses from students, parents, agricultural science teachers, (AST) and county extension agents (CEA).

	Students	Parents	AST	CEA	Other	Total
Number	497	142	134	21	3	797
Percent	62	18	17	3	0.4	100

Table 2. Affiliation of exhibitors (4-H, FFA or both).

Respondents	FFA#	%	4-H#	%	FFA & 4-H	%
Student (496)	159	32	237	48	100	20
Parent (142)	22	16	60	42	60	42
Total (638)	181	28	297	47	160	25

The number as well as the types of market animals exhibited by 4-H and FFA members are shown in Table 3. The data in this table indicates that when cattle (steers) are exhibited, the majority are entered through 4-H programs. Also, when junior exhibitors show other market animals such as sheep at the same show, the majority of the entries are through the 4-H program.

The frequency of project visitation and supervision by County Extension Agents and Agricultural Science Teachers is presented in Table 4. The data indicates that Agricultural Science Teachers visit their students and projects much more frequently than County Extension Agents. In many cases, students enrolled in 4-H programs are never visited by their agents, or if visited, only once or twice during the duration of the project. A significant difference in supervision occurs between the two groups which can partially be explained by the distance to be traveled by county agents who also have less opportunity to talk to their students.

Table 3. Number and type of animals exhibited by students enrolled in FFA or 4-H or in Both FFA and 4-H (student and parent response).

Species	Organization					
	FFA		4-H		FFA & 4-H	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Cattle	19	11	76	26	24	15
Swine	66	36	59	20	29	18
Sheep	22	12	47	16	11	7
Cattle & Swine	19	11	34	11	36	23
Cattle & Sheep	1	0.5	26	9	10	6
Swine & Sheep	42	23	27	9	20	13
All species	12	7	28	9	30	19
Total	181	100	297	100	160	100

Table 4. Comparison of project supervision by county extension agents and agricultural science teachers (student and parent response).

Project supervision	Organization			
	4-H		FFA	
	No.	%	No.	%
More than once per month	41	14	106	59
Less than once per month	48	16	53	29
Only once or twice	107	36	19	10
Never	101	34	3	2

Note: Responses from exhibitors that participated in both 4-H and FFA programs are not included in Table 4.

The rules and regulations governing the exhibition of animals is clearly outlined in the premium list or catalog of each livestock show. Certain drugs and chemicals are prohibited for use in market animals by the livestock shows and to sell market animals that contain drug residues in meat used for human consumption is unlawful. Even though steroid use is prohibited, 63 or 7.9% of respondents indicated that they gave steroids to market animals while 339 or 42.5% used tranquilizers and 198 or 24.8% had given diuretics to show animals (Table 5). In total, 25% of respondents had given illegal drugs to animals being fitted for the show ring.

Table 5. Medications and types of drugs used by 797 respondents in the preparation and exhibition of livestock.

Drug Class	Used		Not used	
	No.	%	No.	%
Steroids	63	8	734	92
Tranquilizers	339	43	458	57
Diuretics	198	25	599	75

Because about 25% of respondents indicated that they used illegal drugs in show animals, either drug testing procedures are inadequate or unenforced, or the exhibitors are very sophisticated in their application and subsequent action. This means that one out of every four market animals that are exhibited have been fitted in a manner that violates the rules of the livestock show. Such practices place other exhibitors at a distinct disadvantage.

In addition to the use of drugs, other fraudulent practices have also occurred with animals being exhibited at shows. About 47% of respondents indicated that either they had registered crossbred animals and had entered the animals in the show as purebreds or they knew someone that did.

Another fraudulent practice involving purebred animals included the falsification of registration papers. Reported violations on the survey included incorrect birth dates, breeding, parentage or ownership, and 37.5% said that they had falsified registration papers using incorrect data or knew someone who had.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

From the data presented in this study, several recommendations can be made to help eliminate fraudulent practices in the fitting and showing of market animals in the junior livestock shows in the state of Texas.

Under the present system, show animals are sold at auction and in some instances the highest bid for champion animals may exceed \$220,000. Competitive advantages in the show ring are more significant when large amounts of money are involved, so over a period of time unethical practices have become more intense and more frequent.

The first and probably most important recommendation would be to limit the amount of money awarded to a junior exhibitor. Rather than pay awards entirely in cash, it might be advisable to present prizes or scholarships. Also, by reducing the amount paid for the grand champion, more money might be available to pay other exhibitors that also showed outstanding animals but were unable to receive championship honors.

Another recommendation would be to enact strict enforcement of the rules printed in the show premium list by the superintendent of each show. Additional testing and stricter enforcement would be more costly, but these activities may be worthwhile uses of the proceeds.

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Closer supervision of animal projects by competent adult supervisors would reduce the use of custom fitters and greatly reduce drug and chemical use.

An idea that has been discussed among livestock exhibitors for several years would be to "slick shear" or "body clip" market steers. Such a practice would practically eliminate the need for custom fitters and allow junior exhibitors with limited skills to clip their animals and ready them for exhibition in the show ring.

A recommendation that would work alone or in concert with those previously discussed would be to establish a "Livestock Hotline" for anonymous reporting of fraudulent practices. A reward for confirmable information would probably increase the success of such a procedure, and the hotline could be used during both market and breeding animal shows.

The livestock show is one of the best junior instructional tools in the field of animal science. As one young exhibitor aptly implied, the exhibition of animals should be a learning experience for young people--parents, teachers and agents should only supervise and offer support.

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