Clearing up your showmanship confusion

by Hoard’s Dairyman staff

Ever since the PDCA (Purebred Dairy Cattle Association) unveiled its updated Showmanship Evaluation Scorecard in 2012, questions have abounded. We sat down with Ted Halbach, a PDCA Showmanship Committee member, to find answers to some questions we’ve heard along the edges of the showring.

During showmanship, a good rule of thumb is to have two-thirds of your attention on your heifer and one-third on the judge. The appropriate attire for showmanship is a white-collared shirt, white pants, a belt and hard-toed shoes. Wearing “bling” draws attention away from the animal and should be moderately discriminated against.

Appearance above all else

“One of the first items showmanship judges will evaluate is the animal’s cleanliness and grooming. They will look at how the heifer is groomed and whether or not it detracts from the animal’s appearance,” noted Halbach.
Central to appearance is a properly fitting halter that is held correctly. **The halter’s strap should be loosely looped approximately three times.** This keeps the halter out of the animal’s eye, as opposed to having the strap in a figure eight. When looping the strap, it is important to keep it loose. If the strap is in a tight coil, and the animal becomes unruly, you’ll have little to no control.

For safety reasons, you should never put your fingers through the ring on the halter, and the strap loop and halter should be held by your left hand at all times, even when walking forward. Doing so leaves your right hand free to touch the heifer at its point of shoulder or pull throat without having to manipulate the strap and switch it from hand to hand.

“Across judges and youth, this is one of the most inconsistent areas in showmanship,” noted Halbach.

Head carriage, or the positioning of the heifer’s head, also factors into appearance. “You do not want to have the nose too high; the animal’s nose should not be above its eyes,” added Halbach.

During showmanship, you’ll face one of two directions: forwards or backwards. Exhibitors should not side step or cross one foot over the other while facing the center of the ring.

**“Showmen should walk facing forward until the last animal in the class has entered the ring. At that point, all showmen should turn around and begin walking backwards,”** noted Halbach. This should be the point when you truly begin showing and the judge starts doing close inspections.

When entering the ring, look to the show steward (ring help) or judge for guidance. As often as possible, abide by the five and five rule — keep five feet between you and the animal in front of you, and stay five feet away from the wall. “Always lead so that the judge, if standing in the center of the ring, sees a side profile of your animal,” added Halbach.

**Part of the picture**

The perfect showman is part of the picture. Overshowing, showing with a high elbow or showing with a stiff arm all demonstrate that the exhibitor is trying too hard and draw attention away from the calf. **“First and foremost, your arms should serve as a shock absorber between your body and the heifer,”** said Halbach.

The prior scorecard forbid the exhibitor from using his or her foot to move the animal’s front feet. The current guidelines allow the exhibitor to use their feet, but it needs to be a subtle, gentle move done in unison with pushing the heifer’s weight back at the point of shoulder.

Using your feet to move the animal’s front feet will not factor into your overall placement in the class, but showmanship is the culmination of many little things. While it is not discriminated against,
having to use your feet to place the heifer will likely be an indication of its overall training. Kicking the front feet is discriminated against, and exhibitors should never use their feet to pose the animal’s rear legs.

When you are asked to pose the animal, the rear legs should be set about 4 to 8 inches apart. For heifers, the leg nearest the judge is back; for cows, the leg nearest the judge should be placed forward. “When posing the animal, the head, neck and spine should form a straight line. You want the calf to appear long, and that depends on alignment,” added Halbach.

**All lined up**

When given the signal to enter the lineup, turn around and walk, facing forward. You should walk briskly but not run. “Often showmen at larger shows will run to the lineup after being pulled, but they need to remember that they are still showing and should pay attention to the appearance of their heifer,” noted Halbach.

As you approach the line, turn around and lead backwards. You should leave about a foot of space between you and the next exhibitor. If the opening is too big, it detracts from the lineup, and it is an open invitation for the judge to place another animal in that spot.

Ensure you go far enough behind the line to get a straight entry; don’t cut the corner short and enter the lineup sideways. Line up based on the position of the first-place animal — this heifer should serve as your benchmark for a straight line.

**After lining up, set up your heifer. In the lineup, the two exhibitors on the ends need to have their rear legs set. If you are in first or last place, the rear leg to the outside of the line needs to be set. For the remainder of the showmen, their heifer should be set up to showcase the fewest faults.**

“The exhibitors in the middle of the line should worry about setting up their heifers to their best advantage, instead of continually shuffling their feet based on the judge’s location,” added Halbach. If an exhibitor is showing an animal in milking form, this rule does not apply; they should continually adjust the cow’s leg placement based on the judge’s location. “when showing cows, the competitor should change the rear legs when the judge is behind the line so that the rear leg nearest the judge is always forward, thus showing off the udder to best advantage.”

Failure to move the feet of a heifer in relation to the judge’s position is only a discrimination (moderate) when you are lined up in a circle around the outside of the ring, not when you are in the lineup.
If the heifer needs to be repositioned while in line, it is preferred for the showman to back it up and reposition the feet instead of pulling forward and making a loop. Heifers can be trained to back up at home by putting slight pressure on the halter and point of shoulder.

“Youth will only be asked to lead counter clockwise if it is a tight class or if they are finalists in a showmanship competition,” said Halbach. If you are asked to lead counter clockwise, walk backwards with your left hand on the halter and begin circling the ring.

“When it comes to showmanship,” added Halbach “the PDCA guidelines trump all, as other available resources may be outdated.” Showmanship is about doing a lot of little things correctly. Judges notice the small things, and these little details will separate out the top showmen.