

A STORY OF A
STEAK
RESPONSIBLE BEEF

- PART TWO -

Growing leaders

By Martha Mintz

The last remnants of dust clinging to boots and pants shake off with each step, settling to the white laminate floors as students shuffle out into the hallway of the R.B. Warren Arena at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln East Campus animal science complex. They break into pairs and groups, lingering to chat or heading off to their next class or meeting, all under the watchful grey-toned eyes of hundreds of those who walked the same path before them, peering out from their place of honor on the wall.

All of the more than 100 black and white photos lining the hallway depict a livestock judging team from UNL's past, chronicling a program that predates even the earliest picture of the 1908 team. It's also a veritable who's who of the premier breeders and industry leaders of the last century. These young men and women took their experiences in livestock judging and leveraged them into careers that have helped them shape the beef industry, improving it from within and promoting it to the masses. They're breeders, scientists, association leaders and more. UNL judging coach Brad Bennett holds high hopes the current group of students and judges will go on to achieve similar, or even greater, successes.

"It's vital that we raise up new leaders within our industry," he says. "There's always been a core of people that have not only progressed the industry in terms of production tactics, but also those who have been vocal and at the forefront, those people we can really look to as leaders of the industry. It's the next generation's job going forward to continue to grow and promote the industry. Without those young people who have a passion for what they do and literally love to get up every day and be around livestock, we're going to struggle to find our voice."

Despite the multitude of ways agricultural students can learn and participate at UNL, livestock judging in particular, he says, provides a set of skills that can really push the future leaders of the beef and other agricultural industries to the next level.

"At its core, livestock judging

is about teaching young people in the industry how to select livestock and be able to integrate and adapt new technologies and principles into livestock production," Bennett says. Livestock judging teaches not only physical selection and knowledge of anatomy, but also how that correlates to the goals of the industry. They also learn about making mating decisions and using genetics and technologies to guide their choices.

But as they learn to form and mold a successful herd, the young livestock judges themselves are being built up for future roles in leadership. "These students learn how to make decisions, become excellent problem solvers and are more than willing to stand behind their decisions and defend them," Bennett says of his team of judges. They build core principles of success including critical thinking, communication and teamwork, all things Bennett is sure will appeal to future employers and serve the students well as they take their next steps in life.

Under pressure

Livestock judging is an intense experience. Once the card is marked and handed over to the official, the livestock judge must stand behind his or her ranking of four animals that often, at least at a cursory glance, look virtually identical. Stress isn't immediately alleviated once the cards are collected, though. Now the livestock judge has to defend those decisions by giving a set of oral reasons.

"Oral reasons are an art and a science all their own," Bennett says. Livestock judges have to walk up to a complete stranger, one on one, and articulate exactly why they made their decisions. They're scored on their accuracy and how well they describe the livestock, but also on their presentation. "They have to be excellent, well-prepared, confident speakers. Those public speaking and communication skills will take them further in life than anything else they will probably learn here because it's applicable no matter if they become an industry leader, a lawyer or a doctor. You always have to be able to communicate and reasons are a great way to teach kids how to do that well and give them

confidence in themselves."

Confidence is built through hard work. The time not taken up by normal college coursework is dominated by livestock judging practice. Bennett works with the team on reasons two to three nights per week and once Friday afternoons hit, the team is usually on the road headed to a workout or a contest. Even the hours spent whiling away in the van aren't wasted as growth opportunities. Here is where Bennett has seen great characters of leadership form, especially in the case of Reese Tuckwiller, a fellow Virginian (though West in this case) Bennett recruited to the team in 2015.

"Reese really embraces the family atmosphere of the team. He wants to know his teammates and supports them. He genuinely wants the people he surrounds himself with to be successful. I think that really defines him as a leader because it's not just about promoting yourself. Leaders bring up those around them. They make everybody around them better people."

Though Tuckwiller sees it as much as a support system for himself. "I came from West Virginia not knowing a lot of people out here, so it was nice to have this huge support system you can lean on," he says. "I spend more time around these people than anyone else in life. They're like a giant family."

And as in any family, there's always someone to look up to. In Reese's case it was his brother, Slayter, who blazed the path for Reese to get into showing cattle. On the UNL livestock judging team, that trail-blazing brother just might be Reese himself.

"Reese is one of the most outstanding people I've ever been around," Bennett says. "He is the epitome of somebody who gives you 110 percent in everything he does, from academics to his work in the community to livestock judging," Bennett says.

As a transfer student with previous collegiate livestock judging experience, Tuckwiller came on the team with a substantial amount of experience as compared to many of his teammates. This forced him into a leadership role and he embraced it, Bennett says.

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Brad Bennett (left)
and Reese Tuckwiller

Growing leaders

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“He really tried to make sure those who looked up to him and went to him for advice got that. He’s shown more leadership capability in the last year than some people show in their entire lifetime. He’s always looking around and finding ways to bring up those around him,” Bennett says.

He recalls one specific instance on a cold January day when the team was having a rough workout. Performance was lacking from everyone, including Tuckwiller. But as Bennett stepped away to set up the next class, he noticed Tuckwiller giving what appeared to be a pep talk to his team. “When you have a bad day at practice, it weighs hard on you. He was trying to get everyone back on a positive note. He was helping them manage the mental side of judging and working through adversity.”

Planting seeds

As Bennett watched Tuckwiller build up his teammates, he recognized some amazing leadership traits he knows will take this young livestock judger far in life. While it’s easy for him to see, he knows Tuckwiller may be completely oblivious to what his actions mean—just as Bennett was once ignorant of his own set of positive attributes.

“When a coach or mentor says you seem like ‘X’ kind of person, you often sit there and think to yourself, ‘I’ve never thought of myself that way,’” Bennett says.

Bennett was told long ago he’d make an excellent teacher and coach, a notion he scoffed at in his youth but has obviously now embraced.

“Very rarely do you realize it when you’re young, but those comments and observations are planting a seed in a young mind,” he says. “They’re saying, ‘Hey, you can do this. You can be this person. You have a quality that will allow you to excel at certain things way down the line.’ I think those seeds of hope get a young person’s mind going as to what their capabilities really are.”

Bennett values those who planted those seeds with him during his youth and tenure as a livestock judger himself. As he worked up through the ranks judging in high school, taking the national championship with his Butler Community College judging team in Kansas and a reserve national championship with his Kansas State University livestock judging team, he found the people, as much as the experiences, guided his path.

“I took from those experiences a set of mentors that pushed me at all times to be the best person I could possibly be. Through livestock judging not only did I learn more about the industry, but how to be the right kind of leader down the line. I learned it’s done by example. I had mentors in front of me that I could emulate,” he says.

Now Bennett is doing his best to set a positive example, foster and nurture leadership in his students and plant the seeds that may help them succeed down the line. Not every seed planted is the same. He notes there are many kinds of leaders. There are those who work

behind the scenes, leading by example through their actions and interactions, building trust. Then there are those who thrive in the spotlight, serving as a voice to the industry and a face for the industry to the outside. Everyone, he says, is geared differently.

“It’s on us as professors and people who interact with youth at this level to understand what makes a person tick and identify personality traits we can accentuate to help that person do well. If you can do that, you can make confident young people who can be themselves, not try to be like someone they’ve seen on TV. To me, that’s what a strong leader is. Somebody who is confi-

dent in their own skin, who knows their strengths and is willing to use them,” Bennett says.

Bennett has high hopes for his judging team, including Tuckwiller.

“It’s the best feeling in the world when you have someone who was a part of your program go on to do great things when they leave,” Bennett says. “Reese has a fire and a passion inside of him for everything he does, especially when it comes to purebred livestock. As a coach and a teacher, those are the qualities in young people you hope to find. To see someone take that passion and manifest it into something great is incomprehensible in terms of how proud I’d be.”



Brad Bennett, livestock judging coach, walks down the hallway outside of R.B. Warren Arena at University of Nebraska-Lincoln East Campus. Livestock judging team pictures and awards are displayed along the wall dating back to 1908.