

A year's worth of love, sweat and determination culminates in the arena of the junior livestock show

SHOW RING DREAMS



Sarah Beal photos

By Ed Crowell

It's showtime, the moment when a year of grit and grime is about to shine. All across Texas, big barns are filling with children and teens and the farm animals they have spent thousands of hours in close contact with over the past year or more. Junior livestock shows are down-to-earth celebrations, giving young people a chance to share the show ring limelight with their beloved critters.

A junior livestock show is not a pet parade. You will see (and hear and smell) cattle, hogs, goats, lambs, rabbits and chickens. But these animals mean business. They have been selected, trained, fed, groomed and nurtured by young people who hope their animals will win awards and be auctioned for big bucks.

The public is welcome at junior livestock shows. Expect a petting zoo vibe, educational Q&As with the young animal handlers,

and up-close views of grooming, feeding and handling. Just bring a sense of curiosity and a hay bale-size dose of support for the tireless young caretakers who, if successful, may have to say goodbye to their animals when they are auctioned off.

Kamrie Stewart, 10, a fourth-grader at Giddings Elementary School, will be one of about 250 young people at the Lee County Junior Livestock Show this month. She won Grand Champion (first place) and Reserve Grand Champion (second place) awards at last year's county show with two halter heifers. For her, and many other Texas children,

showing animals in a junior livestock competition is a family tradition.

Kamrie's large extended family — five households altogether — live on or adjacent to the 350-acre Schatte Hereford Ranch that was started more than a century ago in the community of Serbin, about 7 miles southwest of Giddings. A herd of 100 to 150 Hereford cattle grazes there.

In 2017, Kamrie brought Oreo, her black steer, and Callie and Allie, two brown-and-white heifers, to the competition. She had

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Above, Kamrie Stewart of Serbin, now 10, shows Allie, one of her heifers, at the 2017 Lee County Junior Livestock Show. She won Grand Champion with Allie and will compete again this year. At left, 2-day-old chicks arrive at the office of Trevor Dickschat, head of Lee County's Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service. The ideal age for show chickens is 6 weeks old. The Grand Champion Broiler at last year's show sold for \$5,000. Below, 4-H and FFA members learn how to show their goats at a clinic last year in Giddings.



Photo from Trevor Dickschat

Think it's easy to steer a show animal?



HEIFERS AND STEERS They are big — up to 1,000 pounds and some taller than their handlers. By nature, cattle less than 2 years old can be hyperenergetic and hard to break on halters. They can kick and jerk suddenly, knocking down a show entrant or stepping on a handler's foot.



HOGS They behave well if worked with daily at home. In the show ring, hogs without halters are turned out in the show ring in groups of 10 or more. An entrant must separate his or her hog without touching it, using only a short whip called a bat to guide the hog and turn it to face a judge.



GOATS AND LAMBS They are docile and people-friendly if worked with a lot by the entrants. If not, they may try to escape and climb the show ring fence. To present the goat or lamb to judges, an entrant holds a hand under the animal's jaw without touching it.



CHICKENS Three birds per cage are removed and presented to judges by the entrant and two helpers. A well-handled bird will not squawk or flap its wings.



RABBITS They breed quickly, like rabbits. The goal is to pick three look-alikes and raise them to the same weight and breed standards for showing. Entrant must cradle and turn them belly up for judges to check toenails, teeth and ears. Fur, of course, must look its best.

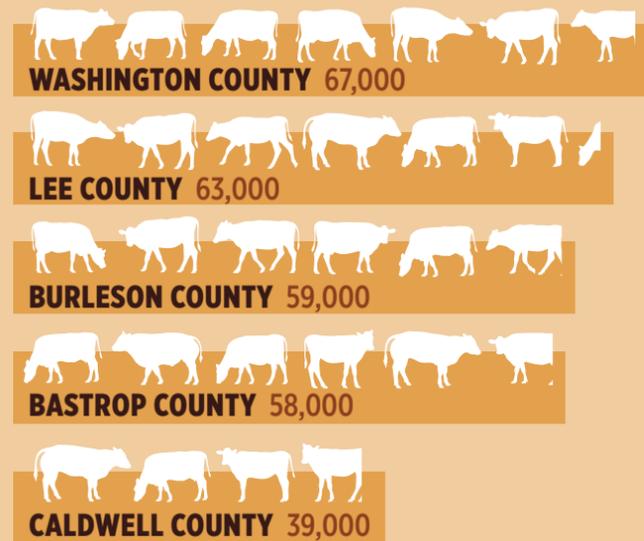
At her home earlier this year, Kamrie Stewart, right, presents Molly, one of the heifers she will compete with at the 2018 Lee County Junior Livestock Show. Below, Kamrie uses a vacuum to clean and fluff the fur of one of her heifers during the 2017 show, with the support of her grandpa, Monroe Schatte Jr.



Upcoming youth livestock shows

- LEE COUNTY** March 1-3
- CALDWELL COUNTY** March 2-3 in Lockhart
- BASTROP COUNTY** Bastrop, March 2-3; Smithville, April 7; Elgin, January 2019
- FAYETTE COUNTY** March 22-24
- WASHINGTON COUNTY** Sept. 19-22
- BURLESON COUNTY** Sept. 24-29
- AUSTIN COUNTY** Oct. 9-13
- TRAVIS COUNTY** Jan. 17-19, auction Jan. 25, 2019 (dates tentative)

County comparison by head of cattle



Source: National Agricultural Statistics Service 2017 estimates

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help washing and brushing the animals from mom Kari Stewart, dad Conner Stewart and uncle Erich Schatte. Grandpa Monroe Schatte Jr. stopped by to offer encouragement.

The junior livestock show, which began in 1973, is a popular annual event in Lee County, where agriculture retains a strong presence halfway between the urban sprawls of Houston and Austin. The nearby counties of Burleson, Washington, Bastrop and Caldwell, all served by Bluebonnet Electric Cooperative, also stage junior livestock shows throughout the year.

Agriculture on family farms and ranches is a challenge today in Central Texas as land prices continue to soar amid the high costs of feed, fertilizer, fuel and equipment. Like Kamrie's parents, many members of agriculture families turn to other occupations and professions off the land for their primary income sources.

The junior livestock shows allow young people to learn responsibility and economics as they buy and raise an animal in hopes of a profitable payoff. They must follow detailed show rules to certify their animals for judging, put in the daily work of feeding and grooming, and display poise and control of their animals in the show ring. The financial return can be substantial if the animal places well and is auctioned for several thousand dollars. Buyers are usually local residents or businesses.

Kamrie helped pick out the steer and heifers for last year's show

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Hogging the limelight

Katelyn Iselt, 17, a junior at Lexington High School, with her Hampshire pig Boots, below, is one of the many students showing hogs at the Lee County Junior Livestock Show this month. Katelyn and her sister, Marla, 14, a freshman at Lexington High, have been showing goats and pigs since they were about 8.

Preparation starts when the pigs are about 2 months old, getting them used to being around humans, walking them at least every other day, and as showtime nears, washing them every other day, conditioning their skin and adjusting their feed to enhance certain aspects of their appearance. Katelyn enjoys showing pigs because of their personality, she said. 'They're easy to get attached to.'

Above, the sisters show off their champion belt buckles. Katelyn won hers for Champion Pig at the 2017 Texas Junior Livestock Association Fall Classic in Waco. Marla won for Grand Champion Goat at the 2017 Lee County show, inset below. Their mother, Ronica Iselt, said showing livestock is a family affair, and the road trips, hard work, wins and losses bring them closer together.



From the beginning: 46 years of shows

In the early 1970s, John Smith was an ag teacher at Giddings High School who thought his students should have a livestock show like many other Texas counties.

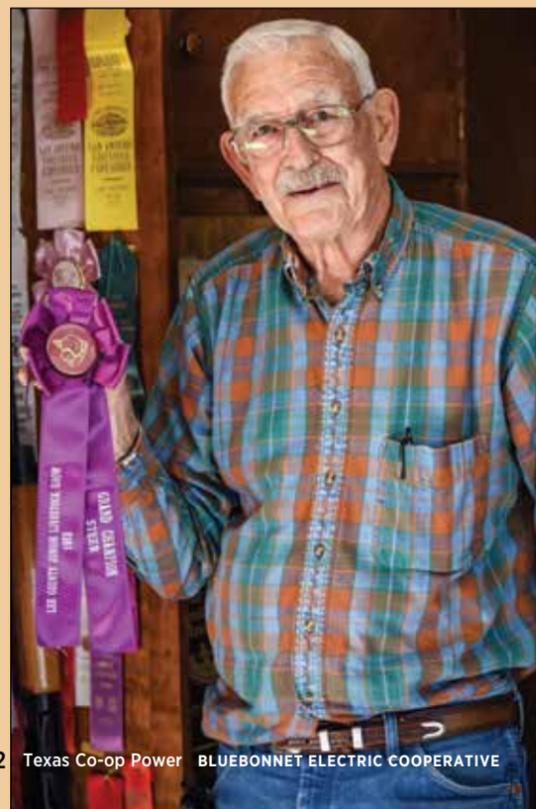
With the help of the Lee County ag agent and 4-H and FFA clubs, the first junior livestock show was in 1973, and 23 youths brought in cows and hogs raised on their farms. No auction was included, but the winners received cash awards from the First National Bank of Giddings.

“The kids and their parents then didn’t really know about clipping and grooming animals for show. They worked their farms and the kids couldn’t even do sports because they had to go home in the afternoon for chores,” Smith said.

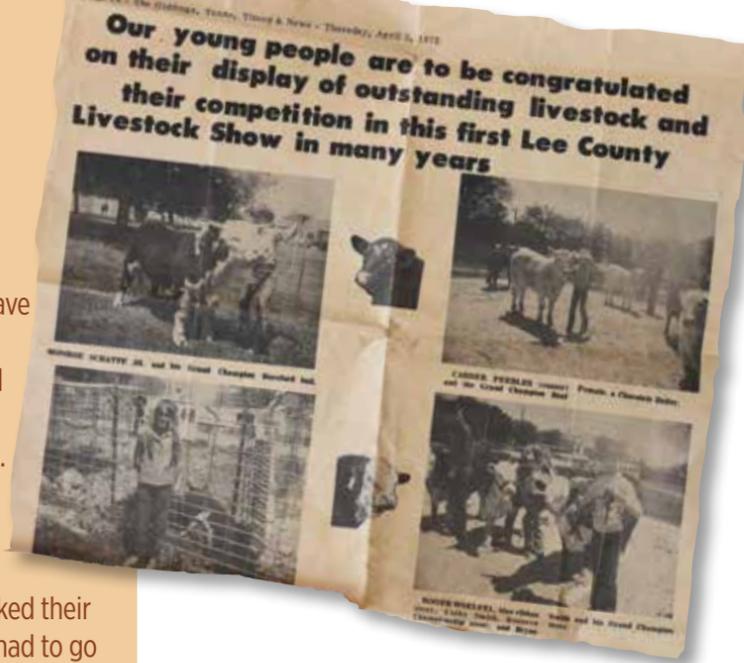
The second show in 1974 doubled the number of entrants, and the third show in 1975 initiated the auction sales that were traditional at more established junior shows. “It was raining that third year and we needed a place for the buyers, so we borrowed a tent from a local funeral home,” he said.

Livestock shows have a rich history in Texas. The first show, in Fort Worth in 1896, was only for adult competitors. The shows soon spread around the country. The Houston livestock show, now one of the largest, started in 1932. Junior livestock shows began in the 1920s and expanded after World War II.

Smith, who still raises cattle on his land near Dime Box, taught at Giddings High for 30 years and is proud that nine of his students became veterinarians. He plans to be at this month’s Lee County Junior Livestock Show. “I’ve never missed one,” he said.



John Smith, a former ag teacher at Giddings High School, helped get junior livestock shows started in Lee County in 1973. At left, at his home, he holds the ribbon his daughter won that first year, as seen in the newspaper clipping above.



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from the family’s ranch soon after they were born in the fall of 2015.

To raise the animals for showing, Kamrie spent three to four hours caring for them after school most every day. They were haltered near her house much of the time and given special feed. She worked to train them to set their feet in the right position for showing. And they were groomed – incessantly.

In the show barn a day before last year’s competition, Kamrie was happy to show off her big box of grooming supplies: brushes and combs to make lower parts of the animals’ coats stand up, others to make upper parts lay down, shampoos, polishes and brightening agents for white sections of hair. But when she asked her mother, a pediatric nurse cradling her baby daughter in a sling, if she could go off with her friends elsewhere in the show barn, the answer was no.

“There’s lot to do here. The weigh-in is coming up, there’s more grooming you can help with and they’ve got to be fed,” said Kari Stewart, who showed animals in livestock shows when she was young.



Trevor Dickschat, head of the Lee County office of the Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service, assists at junior livestock shows around the state. The shows ‘provide an environment that is fun, and you meet people and get skills that will serve you well later in life,’ he said.

County ag agents are expected to “make sure the animals are being nourished and cleaned and groomed properly,” Dickschat said. “We look for any hormones or other drugs being used with the animals. They are supposed to be raised without that, according to the show rules.”

Some big-city livestock shows “turn into popularity contests over whose family name is represented by the entrants and the bidding for the winning animals goes that way,” Dickschat said. “Lee County does a very good job of guarding against that. Bidders here can’t top the amount that the grand champion goes for. I’ve seen shows in other places where the grand champion goes for \$3,000 and the reserve champion for \$8,000 just because that entrant is from a prominent family.”

The state of agriculture in Lee County — mostly hay-growing and cattle-breeding operations — is stable for now, Dickschat said. Land fragmentation (large ranches and farms sold off in small pieces) is likely to reduce the acreage devoted to animals and crops in coming years, he said, adding that “people from Houston and Austin want to have a country place and they look around here for 10 acres or such to put a house on,” he said.

More landowners are turning to hunting leases to earn money, he said. Part of the ag agent’s job is to supervise wildlife leases because those animals are considered an agricultural commodity.

During the 2018 Lee County show March 1-3, Kamrie Stewart will compete for her second year. Her mom said Kamrie “is more relaxed and knowledgeable about getting the animals set up in position fast and remaining calm if they move.” She plans to again enter two heifers and a steer.

She also plans to enter a German chocolate cake she’ll make from her babysitter Carmen Gonzales’ recipe.

There’s more than livestock competition at the shows. The county’s 4-H clubs support photography, literary and musical interests, and baking. The cake competition has two categories: regular and decorated. Last year, the auctioned Grand Champion regular cake brought \$3,000 and the decorated \$1,900.

For Kamrie, it could make for one more sweet ending to the Lee County show. ■

The next day, showtime arrived and Kamrie was ready. She performed with the practiced confidence passed down from a family steeped in the livestock shows of Lee County.

The results: Grand Champion in the halter heifer judging and Reserve Champion in the overall judging of different breeds. Her heifers were not put up for auction. With her steer the next day, Kamrie did not place but she won a jacket award for showmanship in her age group.

Her interest in livestock comes naturally. Her uncle and great-uncle are ag teachers at different high schools.

Kamrie’s uncle Erich also is a veteran of the Lee County Junior Livestock show. He’s a new ag teacher at Sealy High School in Austin County. The key to success at the shows, he said, “is paying attention, watching and learning. And putting a lot of work into it on the ranch. I spent hours and hours in our barn. I didn’t want to go into the house and do homework.”

Rusty Mertink, an ag teacher at Lexington High School, is the uncle of Erich and Kari, and great-uncle to Kamrie. The Lee County show is “one of the biggest community events we have,” he said. “We’ve set records in total sales in recent years despite the economy’s ups and downs.”

Two of his sons, Cole and Clay, were in the 2017 show. “What I like most is seeing generations stacked upon generations here,” Mertink said. And each generation learns responsibility by caring for and feeding the animals. Economics lessons come from keeping a budget of upfront animal purchases and feed and grooming costs. When they go up against one another to show their animals, the young people learn about the spirit of friendly competition.

County agents from the Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service traditionally serve as ad-

visers to junior livestock show organizers and competitors. Trevor Dickschat, head of Lee County’s extension office, spends much of his time assisting at livestock shows around the state, primarily the big ones in major cities. He grew up in the Brenham area and raised hogs for junior livestock shows before attending Texas A&M University and then serving in the extension office in Brady.

Summing up the show experience, Dickschat said: “A few minutes before judges means a great deal to these kids.”

The money young people can bank when their animals are auctioned off at the end of shows is important, but the ag agent says the shows also “provide an environment that is fun, and you meet people and get skills that will serve you well later in life.”

A variety of college scholarships also are awarded through 4-H and FFA (formerly Future Farmers of America) and by area civic organizations to competitors who have demonstrated academic achievement, even if their animals don’t place at the top.

Dickschat said some visitors come to livestock shows just to see animals they don’t get to see up close that often. “We use youth show ‘ambassadors’ to explain to the public what parts of the animal become what cuts of meat or to put on demonstrations, such as how cows are milked.”

He wants people not only to learn where agricultural products come from but to understand that what the livestock show youth are doing is important to the economy.

Rusty Mertink, an ag teacher at Lexington High School and Kamrie Stewart’s great-uncle, said the Lee County show is ‘one of the biggest community events we have. We’ve set a record in total sales each year despite the economy’s ups and downs.’