

Michigan youth travel to Maryland State Fair to refine dairy cattle judging skills

Melissa Elischer - September 19, 2019

Thirty-six 4-H members and alumni traveled from Michigan to Maryland to practice dairy evaluation and life skills.

For many around the state, Labor Day weekend heralds the end of summer with one last long weekend before fall starts to make its presence known. For Michigan 4-H members and alumni, this weekend is something different, the start of the competitive dairy cattle judging season. For 13 years, Joe Domecq, Michigan State University academic specialist and coordinator of the Dairy Management Institute of Agricultural Technology (IAT) program, has brought a group of 4-H members and MSU students to the Maryland State Fair to refine judging skills for three national judging contests held each fall.

4-H members earned an invitation to the trip by placing in the top 25 seniors (ages 15-19) judging the state 4-H dairy cattle judging contest held every July during Michigan 4-H Youth Dairy Days, an annual event hosted by MSU Extension and the Department of Animal Science. After that, youth attend additional practices across the state from July through August to keep practicing evaluating cattle and defending their choice through a presentation of oral reasons. Those 4-H members who attended at



4-H members and MSU Institute of Agricultural Technology students visit the Jefferson Memorial while on a dairy cattle judging trip. Photo by Austin Haywood.

least four out of the eight statewide practices are then invited to an intensive weekend of judging in Maryland.

MSU students vying for a spot on the collegiate or IAT teams are also invited to practice and to the weekend in Maryland. Many of those who continue to judge after aging out of 4-H started their careers as youth in this program. Cameron Cook, an agribusiness management (ABM) major at MSU, is one such person. Cook started as a 4-H member in Clinton County and then moved to MSU as a dairy management IAT student and

judge before transferring into ABM. As a member of the 2017 IAT team, Cook, along with three other students, placed in the top three teams of the post-secondary contest at World Dairy Expo, earning an invitation to a two week dairy cattle study abroad. Cook has been judging for 13 years and been on the Maryland trip several times.

Collegiate and IAT students do not have to start at a young age to learn the art of judging. Leta Larsen, also an agribusiness student at MSU, did not start judging until college and has quickly learned the skills of evaluating cattle and defending her choices.

During the weekend, youth and students judge close to 30 classes of cattle and present 12 sets of oral reasons. They start the weekend by evaluating seven paper classes. Paper classes mean the class of four animals to be evaluated are pictured on paper from three angles (rear, side, top) instead of seeing the animals live. Practicing like this allows 4-H members and students to focus on big picture differences in cattle, such as structure and udder conformation. Several classes are chosen for practicing reasons, part of the contest where participants must explain why they ranked the cattle in the order they did.

On Friday, everyone attends the 4-H dairy show at the Maryland State Fair to listen to the official placings of the cattle classes, learning how professionals talk about cattle classes and examples of phrases to use in competition. Saturday morning, youth and students sideline the Maryland state 4-H dairy cattle judging contest, standing outside the ring and evaluating the classes while working in small groups to discuss placings. After viewing 10 classes of animals, everyone prepares six sets of reasons. Sunday is the final day of the trip, starting with a practice contest of eight to 12 classes where other universities and

4-H programs practice as well. Three more sets of reasons are given on the road back to Michigan and the weekend is complete.

In addition to youth and students, assistant coaches who are alumni of the dairy judging program come back to volunteer their time and talents, helping the young people improve their skills. Sarah Black has been helping with the trip for many years. She was a member of both the 4-H and collegiate teams and now both of her children in 4-H and are part of the judging program. Assistant coaches talk through cattle classes, helping youth and students to see more details than is possible on a paper class. The cattle are evaluated while they walk to determine soundness, musculature and dairy strength, which is more easily assessed. Cattle at this state fair resemble those most likely to be viewed during a national contest. Each coach will listen to multiple sets of reasons over the weekend, offering critiques to help youth and students with their presentation style and vocabulary.

The coaches may also ask participants questions about the class, like what color were certain cattle or which one was the tallest, to help them hone in on details about each animal that help the youth or student better remember and describe them to a judge. After the trip, coaches work together to select the teams that will represent Michigan in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, during the All-American Dairy Show; Madison, Wisconsin, at the World Dairy Expo; and Louisville, Kentucky, at the North American International Livestock Exposition.

The weekend isn't all work. Youth traveling, learning and practicing together create new friendships and strengthen old ones. There are laughs through euchre tournaments after giving reasons, sing-alongs on the bus,

and much more where peer-to-peer and mentoring relationships are established with 4-H members and MSU students coming together for a common purpose.

In addition to learning about judging cattle, groups take advantage of being so close to Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, Washington, D.C. or the Baltimore Inner Harbor in Maryland to learn more about U.S. history. This year, the group visited Washington, D.C. on Friday afternoon for a tour of the Capital and stops at the Jefferson, Lincoln, Vietnam Veterans and Korean War Veterans Memorials. On Saturday night, they traveled to the Baltimore Inner Harbor for dinner and sightseeing, such as the USS Constellation and the National Aquarium.

Although dairy cattle may be the initial draw for youth and students to start judging, there are other skills developed that will serve them outside of the cattle industry. Those that participate in dairy judging learn about discipline, self-motivation, critical thinking, decision making, goal setting, resiliency, communication and much more. These skills are transferable to all areas of life and will certainly help youth and students to be successful in the future.

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