

A CUT ABOVE: EVALUATING

Article written by Master Meat Pen Judge Caleb Thomas

Taken from the ARBA's Domestic Rabbits magazine

As breeders and judges we may not see many, or any, commercial classes at all-breed sanctioned shows throughout most of the year. However, for 2-3 months out of the year as we enter the "Fair Season" these are generally the largest classes we encounter at county and state fairs. Considering we may encounter very few commercial throughout the year; how does one prepare for this 2-3 month season where you may find as many as 40 meat pens at one show?

Remember there is a great deal riding on the placement of meat pens at fairs. For example, the Indiana State Fair Grand Champion is the lone entry in the Spotlight Sale and in 2012 it sold for \$6,400. The second place exhibitor receives a \$250 award, while the third place meat pen receives \$4 class money and a white ribbon. In a class of 40 meat pens, consider the disparaging difference between the reward for 1st, 2nd, and third place as well as the impact on the young people exhibiting these meat pens.

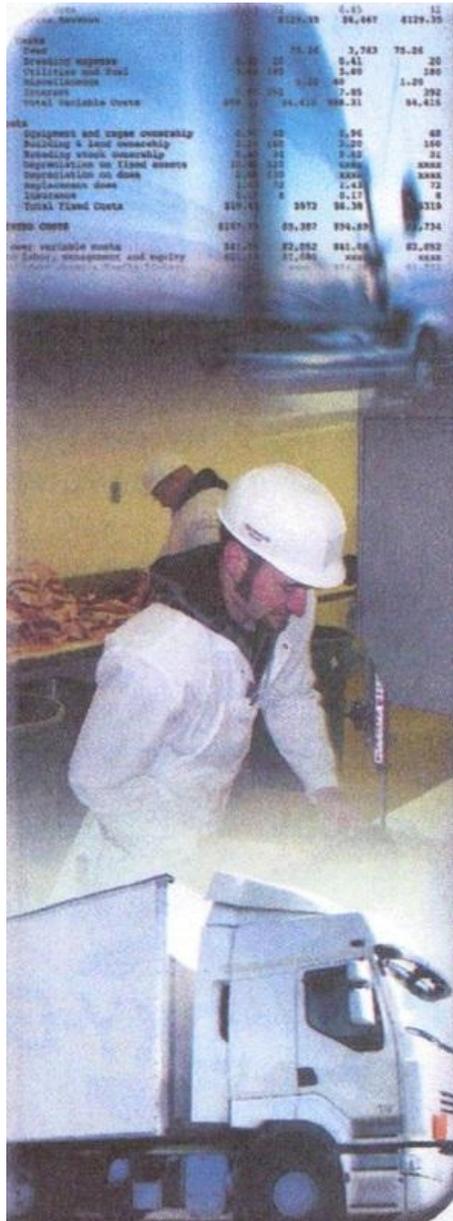


BACKGROUND

The ARBA removed the dressed carcass from the ARBA Standard of Perfection in 1996. Similar to reading a story, this was equivalent of removing the "last chapter in the book" for evaluating commercial classes. To explain this analogy, once the commercial class animals are dressed you can truly see and experience the end product; the very purpose of our commercial classes. I reached out to Mr. John Keenan, of Indiana, a judge and commercial expert, to gain his perspective for evaluating carcass rabbits. I also spoke on several occasions with Mr. Oren Reynolds. Mr. Reynolds not only was an expert judge but also retired from the meat industry. I did not want to lose this opportunity to learn more about what I fear could become a lost science. I wanted to start dressing out rabbits, learning more about how to identify waste and increased efficiency on live rabbits. Note the focus was not a feed efficiency study, but rather on how to produce the most productive carcass meat pens and fryers for the consumer. We tasted the meat from 3 pound, 4 pound and 5 pound live weight fryers. We determined that the prime meat packed 70-day old animal was the best market value in terms of investment versus return. I learned a great deal from listening to ARBA Judge and Animal Science professor - Dr. Scott Williamson. Dr. Williamson, head of the swine Department at California State University-Fresno, possesses a great deal of insight regarding livestock classes. Whether we are considering rabbits, swine, sheep, goats, or cattle; the concepts and ideals remain the same.

PERSPECTIVE

Looking at the commercial class meat rabbits as an industry you must consider the following categories: 1. Producer, 2. Processor, and 3. Consumer. Producers wish to raise rabbits in the shortest time period and at the least expense to have them ready for the processor. The processor wants animals that provide the most desirable product with the least amount of waste. Consumers desire fresh, tender cuts of meat; a valued end product.



ADHERENCE TO THE STANDARD

Separating the meat from the offal: *An easy way we teach our 4-Hers to understand and remember meat pen points is - **MCUF**- - Meat type 40 points, Condition of flesh 30 points, Uniformity of body and weight 20 points, and Fur 10 points.*

The primary consideration must be **MEAT TYPE**- structure, soundness, and the highest percentage of high quality meat vs. bone and belly. It is a common practice to put paramount importance on the top line and other attributes are not



as significant as the all important meat coverage. The loin must be wide, deep/thick without taper. Inspect the rear legs, "how far does the meat go down the leg?" Another area to consider that is often overlooked is the front leg meat. At any dinner table, Mom usually gets the short end of the stick. Keep Mom in mind as she usually gets the front legs; ensure that the meat is well developed and carries down the



front legs. Although bone density is all offal (waste), a well sprung and deep ribcage is necessary because the heart and lungs are vital in sustaining development for a prime 70-day old fryer. Inspect the ribcage girth to insure that you have a sound meat producing animal. Heavier bone, bigger heads, thicker ears and hide are also sources of offal. The end goal is to have as high a dress out percentage of quality meat as possible. 60% dress out is a realistic and desirable objective

CONDITION OF FLESH is important as it lends itself to not only quality of the meat but also the dress out percentage. Remember, this is a terminal class and animals that have not yet reached their full potential have missed the mark (they are not promised for today). Softer flesh, potty fryers or even those possessing a heavy belly will produce more offal



when dressed by the processor. Less prime fryers have more water waste than those with firm flesh and tighter bellies. The ARBA Standard of Perfection defines prime as "*an animal that exhibits ideal condition of flesh and coat*". A trim fryer with no gut, firm flesh, and tight hide is the ideal example of prime condition. Note that there is a difference between a tight hide and one that has started to thicken. A good place to check the hide thickness is over the shoulder. Often times judges and leaders focus too much on **UNIFORMITY OF WEIGHT**. Keep in mind that three rabbits weighing five pounds each does not mean that the pen is uniform. Also note that "uniformity of body and weight" is 3rd in point allocation according to the ARBA Standard of Perfection. Consider size, appearance, weight, meat type, condition of flesh and fur when assessing uniformity; it's not all about the scale! Your best single fryer may not come from your best meat pen, uniformity can be impacted by one outstanding animal in a pen with two average animals.



FUR is allocated the least number of points, however note that when you have stiff competition every point does count. The fur should conform to that breed's Standard of Perfection and be consistent on the three fryers in a meat pen. Reiterating my comment earlier, your best single fryer may not come from the winning meat pen; single fryers have 10 additional points allocated to fur.

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

Just as each breed standard was written to support the purpose for each breed, the standards for our Commercial Classes were written with the same "form following function" perspective in mind. As part of our informal research and efforts to produce the best possible fryers and meat pens, we regularly tasted the meat to observe differences. Fryers were prepared by the same cook using the same method. All in all, 70 days is the optimal age for fryers to have the superior dress out percentage, dressing ease, and the most importantly TASTE. When dressed, these carcasses are glossy with a

thinner, firmer texture. You can observe distinct differences in fryers after they have passed the 70 day mark. Hides tend to thicken shortly after 70 days along with head, ears and bone. As they pass the 70 day mark, the carcasses tend to dry out when dressed as the meat is more sinewy and has a thicker texture; thus producing a chewier meat for the consumer. These "over done" fryers are not going to be the ideal product for consumers who expect tender cuts. Note that the Roaster and Stewer classes allocate 30 points to fur, essentially a third of the points. These classes are nearly as focused on satisfying the fur market as they are meat consumption.

When asked about acceptable breeds weights my response is generally to select a breed and line that epitomizes the commercial ideal outlined in the ARBA Standard of Perfection. Although it may take less time for a Flemish Giant to attain the 4 3/4 - 5 pound optimal weight, due to skeletal development you will not achieve the optimum 60% dress out percentage. Please note that I am not saying that any breed is inferior, rather to consider the realistic objectives for ARBA Commercial Classes and select stock that has been developed for these specific industry demands. In speaking with ARBA Commercial Department Chair, Mr. Terry Grubb, processors are not seeking 3 pound fryers. Most requests for fryers start at 4 pounds.

As I close it is important to mention that I do recognize many meat pens may not end up in a pan at the close of each fair. However, just because many meat pens are not consumed does not mean the ARBA Standard of Perfection



The ARBA Standard of Perfection 2011-2015
(Available at WWW.ARBA.NET)

nor the concepts behind the standards have changed. As dutiful stewards of the ARBA, judges are charged with fully understanding and executing these standards to the best of their ability whether judging at an ARBA National Convention or local 4-H Fair. I understand the quandary we all face with meat pen class "Feast or Famine". Careful study and preparation prior to each fair season will help to insure that we all put our best foot forward and the best consumer product is Grand Champion meat pen. After all, many of these entrants are the result of year-long efforts made by young people who will be our future judges and commercial producers. Let us all reward thier efforts by remaining "A Cut Above".

A judge for 30 years, Caleb got his start raising rabbits in 4-H at the age of 12. His appreciation for the meat classes developed over time as his main focus for the last several years has been judging county and state fairs, trying to give back that which was given to him by so many.

