

The Show Pig Success Equation

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Families across the U.S. involve themselves with junior swine projects for many different reasons with varying goals in mind. For some, the experience of just having a pig to take care of on a daily basis provides a young person with a lot of responsibility. For others, placing well at the county level is a goal. Some have the goal of making the premium sale at a major livestock show; while others make the commitment to go "all out" in an effort to win a major livestock show. Some people believe that those who consistently place at the top are just lucky. I was taught that luck is a combination of hard work and determination. This article will focus on feeding techniques for those individuals who have the ultimate goal in mind of consistently performing well at state and national shows.

Ultimately, the factors that distinguish one as an advanced exhibitor are the level of commitment to the show pig project and the ability to "read" show pigs. "Reading" show pigs is simply being able to analyze the structure, design, amount of body fat, and muscle score of pigs throughout the feeding process. Being skillful in evaluating these criteria enables one to make important decisions throughout the feeding process. Many factors will be discussed in this article; however, for one to be ultimately successful, determination and total commitment is needed by the young person as well as his/her parents. To be successful, it takes many long hours of hard work, practice, and preparation. Five major components of the champion show pig equation must be in place to achieve a high level of success in today's show ring:

- Genetics
- Health
- Nutrition
- Management
- Showmanship

If just one of these components is missing or deficient, the chances of success are greatly diminished.

Every day is critical in the life of a show pig. Showing hogs may be compared to playing the game of football. Football is said to be a game of inches. Those who perform to a high level in all areas of the game and pay attention to details make it to the play-offs. Many times the outcome of a game is decided literally by an inch here and an inch there. The same holds true in the show pig arena. Those who do the little things right every day and pay the closest attention to detail are those who consistently win.

Genetics

The first component of the equation for success is genetics. A show pig's genetic potential is determined by its sire and dam. It is important to start with a pig that possesses the genetic potential to perform in the show ring. Only so much can be done with a pig possessing sub-par genetic potential.

It is crucial that an exhibitor find out who will be judging the target show. Know the type of hog preferred by the judge and become familiar with that individual's priorities and preferences. It is then important to seek a breeder that can supply the type of hog that fits the description of the ideal hog based on the judge's preference. Attending local, regional, state, and national events will help an exhibitor become familiar with a judge's preferences and the location of high-quality genetic breeders. This knowledge will be extremely valuable when seeking a show pig with the genetic potential to perform in the show ring.

Health

A sound, comprehensive health program, which should include routine vaccination and deworming schedules, should be developed with the assistance of a qualified veterinarian. When show pigs are purchased, the buyer should secure the previous health history from the buyer. Knowing previous treatments is valuable to continuation of a sound health program. Exhibitors should implement sanitation and biosecurity procedures to help prevent disease transmission.

Nutrition/Management

Without question, a sound nutrition program is crucial to determining the genetic potential of a show pig. The feeding phase of show pigs can be divided into three key periods:

- Phase I — purchase to ~100 lb body weight.
- Phase II — ~100 lb to 200 lb body weight.
- Phase III — ~200 lb to desired weight at the time of the targeted show.

Phase I

The timing of purchasing and receiving show pigs is very critical. Young show pigs may endure and must overcome many challenges by the time they are ready to be sold and placed on feed. These challenges include — pre-weaning environment, weaning, and possibly clipped prior to hauling to a pig sale.

Because of these stressors, it is critical that young show pigs be handled properly and fed a high-quality “receiving ration.” Frequently, pigs are purchased from many sources and co-mingled. These pigs have most likely had significant differences in disease exposure.

The receiving ration depends on how developed the newly purchased pig is from a muscle and bloom standpoint. For under-developed pigs that need some “catching up”, MoorMan’s® ShowTec® Burst Starter™ 24320 is the preferred ration. For pigs that are about right on muscle, the preferred ration would be MoorMan’s® ShowTec® BB 18 18241, which is an 18% crude protein ration.

From this point, ration adjustments should be made based on the desired amount of muscle and fat composition primarily. With today’s genetic pool of muscular show pigs, most of the pigs are being bred to reach the age of 8-9 months of age when showing. With these genetics, it is important not to “push” them too early with high volumes of feed or too high of a protein. The goal is to grow and develop pigs slowly to maintain structural integrity, particularly through their hocks, and maintain flexibility. As a result, it is not untypical for most show pigs to start on 2 to 3 pounds of feed daily and adjust this intake on an “as needed” basis.

During Phase I, as previously mentioned, most pigs will be hand fed twice daily, normally from 2 to 3 pounds daily. Feeders should be cleaned daily. It is very important to avoid overcrowding newly purchased show pigs. Limit the number of pigs per pen to two or three housed in a pen at least 8 ft. by 16 ft. By the time the pigs reach 100 lb going into Phase II, pigs should be in individual pens. Light-colored pigs should always be fed in locations that are totally shaded. These pigs should be housed in facilities where they will not receive direct sunlight. A sunburn during any phase will cost valuable development time.

During Phase I, it is important that the exhibitor get into the pigs’ pen on a daily basis. This allows the pigs to become familiar with the exhibitor. Thus, pigs will not perceive the exhibitor as a threat. This process takes time and patience on behalf of the exhibitor. Initially, sit in the pen for approximately 30 minutes daily, allowing pigs to approach. As pigs become gentle, begin to touch them. The importance of performing these tasks cannot be overemphasized and will go a long way toward helping exhibitors become successful in the show ring.

An important management factor is to bed show pigs on high-quality bedding at all times. Fluffy, white pine wood shavings are preferred by many individuals. This bedding prevents staining of light-colored hogs, provided the area where the pigs defecate is cleaned on a daily basis.

Training

At 80 lb body weight or less, it is important to begin training show pigs. Pigs should be handled on a daily basis and become exposed to a show ring environment. Start by getting the pigs out of their pens for short periods of time. Gradually increase the show ring training to 20 minutes per head daily. Pigs should be taught to respond to a show whip and “drive” in the show ring in a calm, but athletic manner, with the appropriate pace to exhibit flexibility and athleticism.

Phase II

Phase II begins once the show pig reaches approximately 100 lb. Early in Phase II, it is critical to weigh show pigs weekly. One should determine the number of days to the target show and adjust the pig's feed intake to allow an average daily gain for each individual pig to reach its target weight, as well as make adjustments in protein and fat to keep the pig on track in terms of muscle, structural correctness, and freshness.

Show pigs should be analyzed for structural problems and muscle volume. Pigs that are becoming too heavily muscled should be placed on a lower protein ration, such as MoorMan's® ShowTec® Lo Fat 15 15350, or MoorMan's® ShowTec® 14.5/6 14560. If pigs are extreme in muscle and need to be moderated considerably, the MoorMan's® ShowTec® 11% Swine 12381 product would be the appropriate ration.

If additional fat cover is desired, MoorFat™ 235 should be top-dressed at 2 to 4 oz per head daily or Alliance 3-D™ 12079 at 1 oz per 100 lb body weight daily.

The inclusion of chromium picolinate and L-carnitine in show pig rations is believed to reduce deposition of fat, resulting in the maintenance of a more "athletic" appearance. During Phase II, the use of a top-dress product can be initiated. MoorMan's® ShowTec® Pig Navigator 10200 is often used at this time. It is preferred to top-dress ShowTec Pig Navigator at 4-6 oz per head daily. As show pigs approach maturity, many will begin to display signs of over conditioning. If this occurs, increase MoorMan's® ShowTec® Pig Navigator to 8 oz. daily (0.5 lb) until the desired "top shape" is achieved, at which point MoorMan's® ShowTec® Pig Navigator should be decreased to a maintenance level of 4 oz. daily.

Phase III

Critical decisions need to be made during Phase III (200 lb to show weight). The use of Paylean®* during the final feeding phase should be considered. The needed level of Paylean®* depends greatly on the individual pig. If a pig is deficient in muscle, 9 grams of Paylean®*/ton of feed should be considered for 21 to 25 days prior to the show. Average-muscled pigs may only need Paylean®* at 4.5 grams/ton from day 25 to 10 days prior to the target show, and then the level increased to 9 grams/ton for the last 10 days prior to the target show. Two options exist in the MoorMan's® ShowTec® lineup to utilize Paylean®*. MoorMan's® ShowTec® Finisher Paylean®* 11256 is a complete feed, that, when fed at least 5 pounds of feed per day, achieves the 9 gram rate of daily Paylean®*. MoorMan's® ShowTec® Lean Maximizer® is a daily hand mix product that allows more flexibility in the amount of Paylean®* being fed. Finally, pigs that are heavily muscled may not need Paylean®* or may only need supplementation at 4.5 grams/ton for 14 to 16 days prior to the target show. It is extremely important that each pig be analyzed individually to determine the appropriate Paylean®* usage rate. Paylean®* has been used to achieve the shape and volume of muscle desired for an individual pig, without making the pig look unnatural. After the show pig reaches 200 lb, exhibitors may choose to use MoorMan's® ShowTec® MoorBody™ at 0.5-2 lb/head/day to sculpt pig appearance. For the last two meals prior to a show, MoorMan's® ShowTec® Show Prep 12303 may be fed to help keep pigs hydrated while enhancing fill and expression.

Showmanship

The final component in the equation for success is showmanship. The importance of presenting one's show pig to its potential cannot be overemphasized. Many times a show pig is placed higher than it should, simply because the exhibitor had the ring awareness to "hide" the pig at the appropriate time.

Exhibitors need to use showmanship techniques to accentuate the good qualities of their pigs. The combination of a "good" show pig and excellent showmanship ability are critical to success. The best way for young exhibitors to gain insight on how to become good at showmanship is to observe older exhibitors who have mastered showmanship. Adults should point out the positive qualities of these individuals and have the young exhibitor practice these techniques at home.

Conclusion

Total commitment to a show pig project is essential to become a feeder and exhibitor of champion show pigs. Genetics, management, nutrition, and showmanship are critical components in the equation for success. If any of these factors are deficient or missing, the chance of success is greatly diminished. For those who are willing to make the sacrifices, the show pig project can provide a great deal of enjoyment for young people and their parents.

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