



By Jan Schultz

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For more than 75 years, the Denver Stock Show's Catch-A-Calf Contest has drawn youths from Colorado, Nebraska, Wyoming and Kansas.

And this year, the program's Grand Champion hails from Imperial.

Emma Ferguson, 13, an eighth grader at Chase County Schools and a Chase County Stockmen 4-H member, was crowned the 2014 Grand Champion on Jan. 12 in the Stock Show's Stadium Arena.

As one of the youngest competitors in the yearly event for 12 to 18 year-olds, it was quite the win, but it didn't come without some nerves.

While saying she felt comfortable, she admitted to some nerves as she led "O'Boy" into the market class competition that day.

"I was nervous to actually go in and show," she said.

But, those nerves, and a lot of work, started much sooner than this year's Jan. 12 Catch-A-Calf finale.

A year ago, she was in the ring with a lot of other anxious youths attempting to "catch a calf" at the Stock Show, and was one of the lucky 40 youngsters throughout the week to do so. In her group, about 18 youths vied for the eight calves in the ring at that time.

She earned the chance last year to "catch a calf" after completing an application, that later was picked in a random drawing with 39 others to take part.

She returned to Denver in May 2013 with her parents, Mark and Julie Ferguson of Imperial, to pick up her calf. That began eight months of feeding and caring for the animal, keeping records and communicating with her sponsor, John Brown of Wilcoxson & Brown in Oberlin, Kan., a farming/ranching operation.

When she first met up with her sponsor in Denver last May, she gave him a scrapbook that detailed some of her activities, her likes and more, so he was able to know more about the then 12-year-old.

During the ensuing eight months, she kept in touch monthly with her sponsor, which is one of the requirements of the competition, and is worth 40 points in the tallying for Grand Champion.

Young Ferguson said she sent her sponsor a monthly newsletter with weekly updates included and photos with her steer, what she was learning and other accomplishments.

She plans to stay in touch and invite sponsor John Brown to this year's Chase County Fair, when she'll be competing in the 4-H market beef competition.

The most important aspect, point-wise, of the Catch-A-Calf competition is the record book, with a maximum of 50 points awarded. Expenses, feed costs, supplies and O'Boy's weekly weight gain were among the records included in Emma's multi-paged entry.

Her showmanship performance last week was worth a maximum of 20 points, O'Boy's market class placing and his production performance (cost of gain, etc.) each could also net a maximum of 10 points.

O'Boy, an Angus-Hereford cross, finished second in his market class, while Emma placed second in junior showmanship. Contest rules require that the animal finish in the top four of his market division to compete for overall Grand Champion honors, no matter what the youth's point totals are.

O'Boy's final weight was 1,325 lbs., gaining 685 lbs. from the 640 lbs. he weighed when they picked him up last May.

Another big category, worth as much as 25 points, was the interview process Jan. 11 with a panel of three judges. It also included a two-minute speech on what she learned and how she will promote the beef industry.

Of the 155 maximum Catch-A-Calf points, Emma's total was 139.88 points, finishing six points ahead of reserve champion Riley Eisenhauer of Farnam, Neb.

Emma will have to say good-bye to O'Boy later this week when he'll sell at the Stock Show's junior livestock sale on Friday. The auction is expected to be broadcast on the Denver 9News live webcast beginning at 6 :30 p.m.

"I'll miss him," she said.

But that may be short-lived because in a couple of weeks, Emma said she'll start working on her beef animals for the 2014 Chase County Fair.

Kimberly Cook, UNL Extension Educator, said the Catch-A-Calf program is great for instilling business skills in youths.

"For example, they begin to understand how important it is to keep records and maintain a relationship with their business partners-in this case, the contest sponsors," she said last year after Emma caught her calf.

"They are also responsible for the well-being of an animal and gain interviewing and communication skills during the interview process," she added.

The program began in 1935 when 10 boys caught 10 sponsored calves. The contest quickly caught on, and the program grew to include 52 calves by 1942. Since the mid-1940's, the program offers 40 calves per year.