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Fredonia brothers give prize cattle plenty of TLC before taking fair spotlight

Standing next to a 1,350-pound crossbreed steer, Evan Rathke of the Town of Fredonia uses a long hose to blow-dry the sleek black hair on the animal, puffing it up from its body.

“It keeps the hair healthy because if you just wet them, their hair can get flaky, so you have to treat it like your own hair,” he said. “You’ve got to condition and shampoo it, too.”

Rathke, 19, and his brother Aaron, 16, have spent more than two hours each day since October working to transform three steers and one shorthorn heifer into exquisite, award-winning cattle.



The brothers hope months of dedicated grooming and attention to detail is rewarded by a judge when they show the animals Thursday, Aug. 1, during 4-H judging at the 154th annual Ozaukee County Fair.

The Rathkes have spent years learning how to perfect the regimen of washing, brushing, manicuring and presenting cattle.

At least once a day, each animal is hosed down with soapy water and then blow-dried. Hair on cattle tends to hang down naturally, Evan said, so the brothers fluff it out by brushing it forward.

The forward direction of the hair helps hide flaws on its body and makes the animal’s form more attractive, he said.

“We’re always pulling out the dead hair so it doesn’t look faded and so new hair grows,” Evan said. “You have to rinse them every day and keep them clean.

“You also have to keep them cold because when they’re hot, they shed their hair and then they don’t look as nice.”

Large fans are set up in the barn to cool down the animals. The cattle are then sprayed with conditioner, brushed, blow-dried and brushed a third time.

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"I always brush them out again because their hair is kind of crazy after blowing them out," Evan said.

There are certain techniques to grooming that help make a steer look its absolute best, the Rathkes said.

"On Aaron's steer, his back kind of dips a little bit, so when you groom, you try to grow that hair out to even it out," Evan said. "When you clip it, you cut it really short where the back is flat and you leave it long where the dip is."

In addition to a flat back, the brothers said a judge will look for a streamlined neck, broad shoulders and wide lines on the top of the steer, indicating good cuts of steak on the cattle.

The animal also needs to walk well before the judge.

"If their legs are bad when the judge looks at it, he's going to think there's something wrong with, so he's going to move on to the next one," Evan said.

The hooves on their cattle were trimmed in March, Aaron said, adding that steers with all black hair have their hooves painted to match.

The brothers, who have been showing cattle since they were each in third grade, are both members of the Little Kohler 4-H Club.

Both admitted to struggling at first to find motivation for grooming their animals.

"When I was younger, it felt like work when I would rather be inside playing Xbox. Now I want to be competitive, so I want to put in as much time as possible," Evan said.

Evan is showing a steer and the heifer at both the county and state fairs.

"When I first started (showing), I would go out there once a week," Aaron said. "Then I would be mad in the show ring, like 'Why isn't he walking?'"

"Well, I didn't work on him. So now I go out there every day and work, so it's a lot easier."

A boost in confidence came to Aaron last year when he brought home his first grand champion ribbon for a steer from the County Fair.

"The steer that won last year came from my own cow, so it was exciting that I won," Aaron said.

He is hoping to repeat that success when he shows a 1,265-pound white steer and a 1,080-pound black steer Thursday.

Evan won grand champion for a steer at the fair in 2011. He won reserve champion in his

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division in 2012.

Their mother Jackie said the County Fair isn't the first event the animals are shown at in the season.

"I think what helps motivate them, too, is going to other shows throughout the year so they know they have to get them ready," she said.

Although the Rathkes have already presented animals at shows in Lancaster and Seymour, they agreed those events don't compare to the excitement that builds for the competition on their home turf.

"I like being competitive," Evan said. "It's fun when there are people checking out the animals and then they really look at yours and know it's a nice one and they ask about it. It's fun to be noticed."

The brothers said they work on their animals individually for months, but they are quick to help each other in the set-up time before judging, adding that there are never any hard feelings if one does better than the other.

"We get excited for our family to win," Evan said. "So, even though Aaron won grand last year, I still was happy because he won."

The culmination of months of hard work is rewarded, the brothers said, when they get to see their animals sold in the annual red meat auction.

"When I was younger, it was hard to see them go, but it's different now," Aaron said. "You know you've had a good run, but all of a sudden in October or September you know 'All right, I'm going to start over again' and you get excited."

The County Fair runs through Sunday, Aug. 4.

Image Information: MONTHS OF GROOMING and nearly a year of raising cattle will come down to just five minutes of judging at the fair for 19-year-old Evan (left) and 16-year-old Aaron Rathke of the Town of Fredonia. The brothers have been showing heifers and steers with the Little Kohler 4-H Club since they were each in third grade.

Photo by Sam Arendt

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