

You Can't Judge a Cow by its Spots: Life Lessons Learned from Dairy Judging

“I place this class of Holstein two-year old cows one, two, four, three. In my top placing, one places over two because of her advantage in the udder.” Giving a set of dairy judging reasons may seem like a unique skill not able to be used in the real world. However, as my collegiate dairy judging career comes to an end, I have been reflecting on the impact dairy judging has had on my life. I started dairy judging in 4-H and continued in FFA. I furthered my involvement on the collegiate team at the University of Minnesota. I am grateful to have had wonderful coaches, mentors and teammates who have supported me over the years. Dairy judging teaches youth and young adults many valuable skills and leads to great connections and friendships. Many of the lessons youth learn through judging will continue to help them in their future careers and throughout life.

Here are five life lessons I learned from dairy judging:

1. Do something you are scared of.

My first dairy judging practice is one of my most vivid childhood memories. I remember standing outside of my neighbor's barn listening to several older 4-H members give their reasons. The amount of details they included about the cows from the short amount of time they spent learning their reasons shocked me. I doubted my own ability to place a class of cows and give a set of reasons, and I told my mom I did not want to attend another dairy judging practice. Despite my initial hesitation, I tried dairy judging a few more times before realizing I enjoyed it. As I grew older, dairy judging started to become one of my favorite activities. Through this experience, I learned the importance of going outside your comfort zone to try something new. If I would not have stuck with something I was scared of at first, I would have missed out on many opportunities.

2. Make your decision and stand by your decision.

Decision making has never been a strength of mine. During dairy judging, I was forced to decide how I was going to place each class of cows in a timely manner. Not only did I have limited time, but I also had to make sure my placings made sense and I could defend them. Decision making is something I will continue to do for the rest of my life. While dairy judging did not solve all of my indecisive tendencies, it taught me how to make well thought out decisions quickly under pressure and defend them when needed.

3. “You can’t milk a topline.” - Dr. Les Hansen

My collegiate dairy judging coach at the University of Minnesota, Dr. Les Hansen, gave us many pieces of advice during practice to help us become better judges. “You can’t milk a topline” is one of the pieces of advice he gave us that sticks out in my mind. He was pointing out that while a cow with a straight topline might look eye catching, a high-quality udder has more functional importance and is worth more points on the [dairy judging score card](#). There are many instances in life when it is necessary to weigh two or more options. When evaluating various options, it is important to step back and think about which option fits what you value to be significant or meaningful.

4. You are not always going to agree with the judge.

Dairy judging is subjective. Often, I placed classes differently than the official. This might have been because I missed seeing something important or because I preferred a different type of cow than the official. Whether it was in practice or a contest, I always tried to understand why the official placed the class the way he or she did. You may not always agree with the “judge” in life either. The “judge” might be your boss, a family member, a co-worker or a friend. Having the

ability to see their point of view might not always be easy, but trying to understand their reasoning is more effective than complaining about or disagreeing with them.

5. Support your team.

In dairy judging, contestants are placed both individually and as a team. Sometimes, my team was very successful, but I was not successful individually. Other times, the opposite occurred. During every contest, I hoped everyone on my team would have a good day and we would do well together. I would not have been successful without the support and competition from my teammates during practice and contests. Every member of the team played a different role and had different strengths. Seeing my teammates achieve their goals and do well was just as exciting as being successful myself. This is a good reminder to always thank, congratulate and support those who have the opportunity to work and be a part of a team with, no matter how well you do yourself.