



Beef cuts to boardroom

OSU meat judging team members gain experiences that will last a lifetime

Since 1926, young men and women have seen their lives transformed as a result of their experiences on the Oklahoma State University meat judging team.

Current and potential students are becoming more interested in this competitive venue. OSU's team has proven its worth, not only by capturing top honors at the nation's most prestigious contests but also by winning outside of the United States.

The 2008 team won the Australian National Meat Judging Contest, winning the beef judging, lamb judging, placings and reasons/questions divisions. The team competed against Australia's top 10 teams and the national team representing Japan.

So, what drives their passion for competition, career advancement and self-improvement?

"Students involved in meat judging want to do something more with their college career than just go to class," said Glen Dolezal, former OSU team coach.

In 1999, after 16 years experience with OSU's team, Dolezal joined Cargill Meat Solutions, where he currently serves as the director of new technology applications.

Gretchen Hilton, OSU meat science assistant professor and current meat team head coach, said meat judging is a great competitive venue for college students.

"Participating on a collegiate judging team is often one of the last things people can do in their lives that is competitive," Hilton said.

Brad Morgan, OSU meat science professor, said meat judging not only increases the students' knowledge but also teaches them how to prioritize their daily lives and to focus their college career paths.

"Students on judging teams treat college like a job," Morgan said.

With 16 national championship titles to OSU's credit, the 2008 team members are excited about pursuing collegiate championships and gaining experiences that will set

them apart from other candidates when applying for jobs in the future.

"The opportunities for graduates with meat judging experience are endless," Hilton said. "We're a very tight-knit group in the meat industry."

Carrie Highfill is one team member looking forward to a future in the meat industry.

"Because we travel all over the U.S. to compete and practice, it's a great opportunity to learn about the industry," Highfill said.

A junior at OSU, Highfill is pursuing a degree in food science with minors in agricultural economics and animal science. She said she plans to pursue a career in meat research and development upon graduation.

The skills and experience

Those interested in meat judging might ask: "Do I need previous experience? What if I know nothing about writing reasons?"

Hilton said the key to success can be found in three principles: hard work, dedication and a desire to learn. In addition to these principles, students should enroll in the prerequisite course for the team, ANSI 3182: Meat Grading and Selection.

"No prior knowledge of meat judging is necessary to do well," Hilton said. "If you are interested and apply yourself, you are sure to succeed."

Proving Hilton's theory true are current team members Breanna Winters and Kelly Manke. Winters, an animal science senior, had no previous experience judging.

"I first got interested in meat judging after I took a job in the meat lab of the Food and Agricultural Products Center," Winters said. "I took ANSI 3182 in the fall and started judging with the team in the spring."

Manke began her collegiate judging experience from a complete outsider's perspective.

“I didn’t even know it existed until about a year ago,” Manke said.

Manke grew up in Marlow, Okla., and was part of an agriculturally involved family, although she never participated in 4-H or FFA.

“It was new territory for me, but it has been an amazing experience,” Manke said. “I wouldn’t trade this experience for anything.”

Hilton said everyone on the team will succeed at whatever career they choose, thanks to their team experience.

Jason Apple, an OSU meat judging team alumnus and professor of animal science at the University of Arkansas, agrees with Hilton.

He noted if you apply yourself mentally and physically, you are bound to succeed not only as a meat judge but also in other areas of life.

“Judging teaches you to recognize a problem, make a decision, then justify that decision using sound logic,” Apple said.

Winters said she has learned many beneficial skills for her future.

“I have definitely learned decision making, critical thinking and communication skills,” Winters said. “Judging also teaches you how to work with and get along with other people.”

Morgan, Apple and Hilton all said time management is an important skill students learn when beginning their judging careers.

“Practice begins at 5 a.m.,” Hilton said. “We practice during the week and also on the weekends. When you’re getting up that early to spend five to six hours in a cold

meat locker, you have to be both dedicated and know how to manage your time.”

So, where can it *really* take me?

Dolezal said Cargill highly values job applicants with judging experience.

“They have proven they can travel, relocate and have a firm grasp of the industry when they graduate,” Dolezal said. “Because of this, Cargill is supportive of intercollegiate meat judging and hosts competitions each year.”

Team members have the opportunity to travel throughout the semester to practice and compete at various non-university locations. These facilities include Cargill Meat Solutions, Beef Products Inc., National Beef and Tyson as well as unique locations like Australia.

Morgan said many companies will consider time served on a meat judging team as up to a year’s worth of professional experience.

“Employers can see the difference,” Morgan said. “When you have the judging experience, it makes the transition from college to a job almost seamless.”

Winters said she is confident about her future in the meat industry.

“When an employer sees meat judging on your résumé, your experience gives you a better chance at being hired than other animal science candidates without the judging knowledge,” Winters said.

With their abilities, team members are equipped to succeed in everything from the world of business to family life. • *By Leigha Stevenson, Rockwall, Texas*

2008 meat team members Kacie George (left), Lacey Vedral, Kashen Urban, Breanna Winters, Brendon Lowe, Carrie Highfill, Andrea Garmyn, Jill Fletcher and Kelly Manke join head coach Gretchen Hilton on a visit to Cargill Beef Australia.

