



GET 'EM GROW 'EM SHOW 'EM

A simplified overview of showpig management from start to finish to help you be successful with your swine project.

Written by Ian Schaefer

Ian Schaefer and his siblings, of Schaefer Livestock in Garden City, TX, are no strangers to success in the showpig world. Ian's family runs approximately 65 sows, producing competitive barrow and gilts. In addition to many class winners and breed champions at the county and state level, they have bred, raised and shown the Grand Champion barrow at the Houston Livestock Show and the Reserve Grand Champion barrow at Rodeo Austin, in just the past few years. Ian, who was the TPPA intern in 2014 and has a long list of accolades from collegiate livestock judging, recently graduated from Texas Tech University with his Animal Science degree and is currently pursuing a Master's of Business Administration, also at TTU.

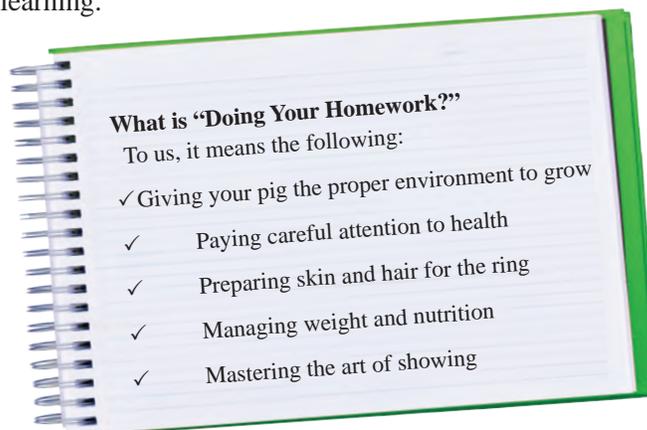
The time to shop for show pigs for the Texas majors is upon us! For breeders and feeders alike, this is an extremely exciting time of year, maybe the most exciting. We get to see how breeding decisions worked out, if your go-to breeder's best sow hit again this year, or if the hottest sire will keep his reputation. The cool thing is, regardless of how last year's set turned out, this group will have the chance to be the ones you always dreamed of feeding. We know there are so many challenges associated with finding quality show pigs that fit your budget, come from breeders that you trust, and are at a farm within a reasonable distance from you. Once those obstacles out of the way, there can still be a ton of questions about how to correctly manage your project. Our goal is to hopefully help you take as much guesswork out of getting your pig ready as possible by providing you with some insight as to what to do on a daily basis at home. We will not delve into the complexities of what to actually feed pigs here, but just about everything else will be covered. If you've got the drive to put in the extra hours at home to make your show pigs the absolute best they can be, but aren't quite sure where to start, this will give you a good idea about some of the things that should be taken care of.



There are many great feeders and showmen and women across the entire nation, but this article will focus on what we have found to work best for us. It's funny: my family had a barn full of barrows every year for more than fifteen years and learned something every time we hauled hogs to a show, yet here we are now with empty pens and some knowledge under our belts that we cannot even put to use. I say this to make the point that if you have questions that are not answered here, you should take advantage of the fact that experienced hog guys would love to share their knowledge with you. We would never claim to know every secret in the book, but over the years, we've developed quite a few habits that we put into effect when raising our hogs to be shown. One thing to keep in mind: Never, ever stop learning.

The most important piece of advice I would give is to "do your homework." I know that's something that isn't always a joy to get fired up about, but when the time comes to get your pig shown, having completed your "homework" is the position you want to be in, because it's the position you'll have to be in to win, most of the time.

These topics are broad, yet they form the basis of what we believe you should be doing to put yourself in the best possible position to win.



What is "Doing Your Homework?"

To us, it means the following:

- ✓ Giving your pig the proper environment to grow
- ✓ Paying careful attention to health
- ✓ Preparing skin and hair for the ring
- ✓ Managing weight and nutrition
- ✓ Mastering the art of showing

We've broken the entire process down into three parts in a timeline:

- (1) The Receiving Phase (2) "Life as a Show Pig" (3) The Training Phase

The Receiving Phase - Getting Started

This portion includes everything that should happen in the first month that you have the hog. Typically, the pigs that you buy will be 8-10 weeks of age, a time in their life where stress can be fairly high, and where they can be quite sensitive to factors like weather and potential illnesses. Getting the pigs from their old home to their new one can be tough on them. I think we have all purchased hogs that we get home and are disappointed to find don't look as "fluffy" or "happy" as when we bought them. It's important to consider that while in transit, they need to stay as warm as possible in the winter and cool in the summer. Temperature extremes and swine in general are not a great mix, so taking pigs out of a heated barn and into a trailer in the freezing cold can be a shock to them. This is something to keep in mind.

Once getting the hogs home, we recommend focusing on keeping them warm and dry, while making sure their appetite is satisfied. This includes proper bedding, not putting hogs that are variable in size in the same pen, and providing fresh feed and water. If you hand-feed early on, it's easier to tell whether or not they are eating their fill and it helps hold you accountable for checking on them, not just making sure "the self-feeder is full." During this stage, health is crucial and any signs of discomfort need to be addressed as soon as they are discovered. In our experience, when a pig isn't completely healthy, their willingness to chow down at the trough is the first thing to go.

In addition to being sensitive to the environment, baby pigs are at a crucial stage in their lives nutritionally. It is very important to make sure that your pigs get all of those needs met. Typically, as long as you are feeding a starter feed that has been formulated for piglets, you are good to go. You do not want to leave them on these rations for too long as most show pigs out there right now have enough muscle that leaving them on these elevated protein and lysine levels will result in them being too "raw" in their look. It is important to transition to lower protein levels at some point or move away from "hot" feed, as we say. Starter feeds are expensive, so it is pragmatic to transition away from them economically, too. My advice would be to not make any drastic feeding changes overnight in order to avoid hiccups that changing feeds too quickly could cause, such as scours and loss of appetite. With any feeding move, patience is key. The nice thing is that pigs change more rapidly from diet changes than other species, so we already have that to be thankful for.

We also like to get show whips, strings, water bottles, or anything else that the pigs are interested in and let them "play" with it so they know you're not something that is trying to harm them. Getting in the pen with your pigs while they eat just to let them adjust to your presence is never a bad idea, and we also like to play the radio in our barn 24/7 so human voices are something they're used to. This might be especially important if you only feed a couple of hogs because you do not want them to go from a quiet barn where they are the only thing that moves, to a barrow show with 2,500 hogs and experience a pretty big "culture shock." If you do only feed a couple of hogs, we would strongly recommend hauling them to a jackpot or your county prospect show to get them acclimated to seeing other hogs.

The pens in our barn were 6' x 12' which is definitely large enough for two pigs until they both weigh about 100 pounds. In a perfect world we would prefer one pig per pen, but if it is not possible and you must combine hogs in this way, be careful to make sure that one doesn't "hog" all the feed (no pun intended). We get a lot of questions about whether or not outside runs are necessary for feeding hogs, and we would say "no" as long as you exercise enough. Still, just because they have a big pen does not mean they'll walk themselves to exercise, so you will still need to get them out. We used outside pens (any size is fine) with a slide up door made out of plywood to help get our dark pigs' skin darkened before shows and when we had beautiful West Texas fall weather to let them just relax outside. Fresh air for show pigs is always a good idea if you have a totally enclosed barn.

TRANSITIONING FEEDS

This time of the year barns are filling up fast with new projects. Prior to bringing your new project home, make certain that you ask the seller what kind of feed the animal has been on. To transition between different feeds, the following method is recommended for your showpig project.

No matter what size of animal you have, transitioning from one feed to another works best if done over a series of days. For example, it's suggested doing feed changes over a period of 7 days. Start by mixing 3/4 of current ration to 1/4 of new feed, then on day 3 mix feed at a 50:50 ratio. Finally on day 5, you can go 3/4 of new feed to 1/4 of old ration and conclude on day 7 with the complete transition to the new ration.

Daily Care – “Life as a Show Pig”

About a month after arrival or when your pigs are close to 100 pounds, we suggest that you begin weighing and washing your hogs weekly. We always chose to do this every Sunday, but feel free to pick any day of the week and stick to it, that way you know when you last weighed and you can track gain effectively. During this time, we brush three times a week with products like Purple Oil or Champions Choice, and let the pig out of their pen to walk around in a larger area on the days that we do not brush them. This is the time in a hog’s life where you will figure out how easy or difficult you predict them to be to train. If they take off running every time you let them out, you might have your hands full. It’s important to know this early on, rather than finding out they’re a “runner” as you chase your pig up and down the aisle at, let’s say, San Antonio, where there



Exercising done as a team is always more enjoyable.

are too many people to navigate through. Dealing with the situation at home on a random afternoon is much less stressful than doing so at a stock show with hundreds of hogs and people around to spectate. We understand that you never really know how your pigs will behave at the show, but if they know you and trust you, they’ll typically let you guide them wherever it is you want them to go. This is another reason why hauling to a show before their endpoint is a good idea. Teaching them that you’re the one who takes care of them makes this entire process easier as well.

Between now and December, we would expect health to be the most significant challenge to your project. Things happen and your pigs can get sick, but it is our responsibility as pork producers to treat any illnesses that come about, and your success as a showman depends on it. Depending what area of Texas you live in, the weather and

temperature could start changing often, and this will create challenges for keeping your animals healthy. This is something we can deal with, but we must be aware of what we have to do for our livestock and their well-being. Currently keeping them cool and comfortable will be your top priority, but when the rain and cooler temperatures come, I would consider keeping pigs dry to be more important than extra bedding, but neither can be ignored.

By December at the latest, you will need to have started making ground getting your pigs conditioned to being around people and being in and out of their pen. The good news is: as long as you’ve done your part to keep your hog warm, dry, and healthy until then, it is definitely not too late to start working towards getting your show pig ready to hit the ring.

The Training Phase

We have already talked about “The Receiving Phase” and “Life as a Show Pig.” Of course, those will be imperative to your success, but the next step is the MOST IMPORTANT when it comes to showmanship itself and actually driving in the ring. You can do everything else right, but if you fail here the whole project could be jeopardized. You don’t have to have 15 years of experience or a million dollars to make this happen; you just need the determination to dedicate your time to your project.

A common misstep that we see showmen make is waiting too long to begin training their hogs to show. In retrospect, it’s something I would certainly do a better job of if I were still showing. We recommend beginning two months out from your target show at the latest, or whenever they weigh about 150 pounds. One important concept to remember is that there is a distinction between training and exercise. Training is teaching your hogs to drive with a pipe or show whip, while exercise is simply letting them out of the pen to stretch their legs. You need to have been weighing them periodically by Thanksgiving so they should know what a show whip is and know that you will be in control. The beginning of the training phase cannot be the first time that your pigs are out of the pen. That is too late to start.

The following are three key objectives we outline when training show pigs:

- ✓ **“Get ‘em moving” in a straight line**
- ✓ **Teach them that you will steer them where they need to go**
- ✓ **Tap their head up**

We spend a week on step 1, then a week on step 2, and then move on to step 3.

Getting their head up looks great, and I find driving a pig that will do that one of the neatest feelings involved in showing, BUT it cannot be considered more important than the pig walking. Really slow-moving hogs or those standing still with their head up will very rarely get along in the show ring successfully. One of the most frustrating things for a judge is when they find a hog they believe they like, but can’t get a true read on because the showman is coming up short. It’s the responsibility of the person driving the hog to have done the preparation at home to be ready to showcase the hog on the big day.



Teach them to walk in a straight line and keep them moving.

Let's talk about training in week 1. By now, the pig should be used to being out of their pen, but getting them out of the barn itself may actually be a challenge. Keep in mind, the first day you try to really train your hog it's very possible that just getting them outside is a win! Don't overwork the pigs; they'll remember better than you think the next time you try and it won't be fun for anybody. When we do get the barrows outside we walk them in a big pen (about 20' x 40'), but there isn't anything wrong with no pen as long as you have plenty of space. For the surface, we use recycled bedding from the barn, which emulates the show ring at a major show fairly well. Watch for sharp rocks, wire, and other objects that could hurt a hog's foot.

To accomplish the first of our three major tasks to get them to drive like champions we must "get 'em moving." The most effective way that we've found to do so is to use the show whip to steer them, while patting their back with the free hand to get them to drive. A lot of pigs (some breeds more than others, we've found) tend to go in reverse. The best way that we've found to cope with this is to make sure that when they do go in reverse they simply go backwards in a straight line and don't get the chance to turn around. If they do manage to turn around after backing up, they'll figure out that that is their opportunity to get away from your control and will make a habit of doing it often. By ONLY letting them back straight up and moving backwards with them, they'll learn that it isn't going to get them out of being worked. We haven't ever had a hog that we haven't been able to break of the walking-backward-trick, but it is a challenge that takes patience to overcome.

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While training, visualize the situations you'll face at the show.



Practicing all situations, such as coming out of the holding pen, will pay off when it counts.

As mentioned, our pen is 20' x 40'. To start, we just walk them the length of the pen, turn around, and walk it again until the pig gets fairly tired. For the first week, it may only last 7-8 minutes before they get tired and need to be put up until the next day.

We spend the second week of training barrows and gilts getting them used to steering. By now, they know to go in a straight line and typically will do so until they come to the fence or some other object that stops them. In our pen, we'd use a sort of zigzagging pattern from one end to the other, or we would choose different items around the pen and act like they're the judge... We would show these fake "judges" a chest, rear, profile, front three-quarter, and rear three-quarter shot. What's also helpful is if you have your brother, sister, parent, ag teacher, or county agent there to help you and they can be the pretend judge for you. Whoever helps you with your pigs can also tell

you which angles look the best and which angles you should showcase to the judge. It's a completely different vantage point to be looking at the pig while showing it than it is to see it from 15 feet away like the judge often will.



Use your driving device to teach them where to go and to keep that heads up cocky look.

The third week and every week after can be more focused towards getting that hog's nose up in the air like we all want to do. This is usually accomplished just by tapping under the barrow or gilt's chin. Most of the time, because they already know that they're supposed to go in a straight line, they'll continue to walk forward even when their chin is being tapped with the show whip and they'll drive up-headed. During this time, keep in mind that patting them on the back with your free hand at the same time as tapping their chin will encourage them to walk forward with their heads up.

Next, we're going to cover what you should actually do in the show ring. We've been talking about doing your homework. In school, if you want to do well on test day for your math class, you should have a pencil, calculator and scratch paper. With the show ring as your classroom, you better have the right tools to ace this test. That means having a brush, a towel, your show whip and whatever paperwork is needed, such as a CTBR certificate.



IT'S SHOW TIME!



Judge's form first impressions about pigs, and at times, it can be hard for them to change what their initial thoughts were. That's why you need to ***Make sure the first look is right, or else it's going to be an uphill fight.*** You and your pig need to be ready to go, so when you enter the sift pen or the big ring for the first time and those judge's eyes are dialed in, you better start showing and presenting your pig. Too often when that gate opens, exhibitors or their pigs are not ready. Those first three seconds are crucial and can be the difference between a ribbon or never getting another serious look. That's really the only time you can be assured that the judge's eyes are solely on your pig; my advice is to not waste it. Along with your pig looking its best, let's not forget about ourselves and the judge's first impression of you too! You have to look the part, which means dressing appropriately and looking sharp; no holes in the jeans, tennis shoes, untucked shirts, etc. Boys- be clean cut, fix your hair and wear a collared shirt. Girls- avoid the excessive jewelry and accessories. No doubt there are some that have turned the stock show into a fashion show, but you want to be remembered for doing an awesome job showing that great pig, rather than that distracting outfit.

Putting yourself in position for success is about being seen. If your pig is not seen by the judge, how can it do well? In order to be seen, you need to have ring awareness. You'll need to not only stay out of the pack and separate yourself from the congestion of other pigs, but you also need stay out of the corners and avoid riding the rail. The other important part to being seen is to position yourself the right distance away from the



judge. The judge cannot see your pig or get the best view if you're driving it right underneath him. There will be times when the judge wants you to drive your pig towards him or he'll get up close for the view he wants, but staying approximately 10-15 feet away provides for a great view as that is where he will typically be surveying the ring. You must anticipate where the judge will be headed, where the pack of the other pigs are, and find space.



Great examples of distance and position!



Showmanship is about putting your pig's best attributes on display for the judge. Everything previously mentioned will help with that effort. For the pig to look its best, you want the pace to which it's walking to be natural, not too fast, not too slow and certainly not stopping (*typically happens when focused too much on keeping the head up or making it too high*). Which brings us to the point of **Keep 'em on the go, if you want to win the show.** When the judge's eyes are on your pig, you need to keep driving. At the same time, you can overdrive your pig which can create a problem and get them too tired out to where they break down on you. You definitely want to avoid that if you're going to have a chance at the end of the class. When you're in the holding pen, you need to keep your pig cool and relaxed; spray water on it and do not let it fight with other pigs. If you're out in the ring while the judge is still in the sift pen, let your pig take a breather.



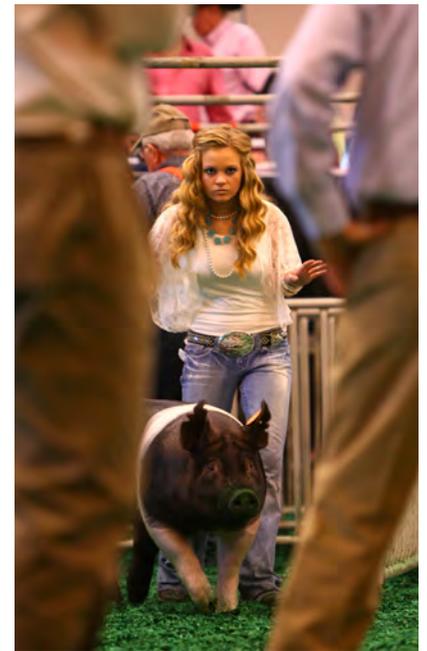
Let your pig take a breather when the judge is not in the ring.

Be a student of the game. Watch earlier classes so that you know the sequence of events and can see this particular judge's tendencies and how the ring staff operates. Since you did your homework at home, you now won't have to focus so much on your pig; you can now focus on the judge and the situation, and put yourself in the best position. A difference seen in showmen with experience- is focus, intensity and confidence. While you want to enjoy yourself and have fun, because that's what showing is all about, you need to show the 'will to win' in the ring, not show off every tooth in your mouth from the world's biggest smile (reserve that for after you win). When you drive your hog, you need to convey to the judge that you're the best and your hog is the best. If you show that way, the judge will definitely take notice in a good way.



**THESE SHOWMAN
HAVE THE
DETERMINED
LOOK OF A
CHAMPION.**

Preparation = Confidence



But there is a difference between being confident and being cocky. Showing livestock is a tremendous tool for youth development and I feel there's no better activity out there. It's sad to see any instance when that objective and sportsmanship is lost. So it's important to know that ***If you want to win the banners, you must learn to show with manners.*** Stay humble in winning and gracious in defeat. Shaking the hand of the judge and your fellow competitors, and being sincere about it, is important. Remember, there's always another show and everyone will have their day. This is also in reference to how you treat your pig. NEVER beat on your project or overuse the whip, at any time; have patience and keep your cool. While pigs are one of the smartest animals out there, it takes a lot of time to train them properly; and even then, things don't want always go as planned. Success is where preparation and opportunity meet.



Make sure to thank the judge and congratulate other competitors.

Remember to ***“do your homework”*** and you'll ace the test!