

● Judging Meat Pens

Terry Fender, ARBA Judge

Meat pens and single fryers are a big part of the junior fair experience for many young rabbit breeders in both 4-H and FFA. Let's spend a few minutes and discuss what we are looking for when raising, selecting, and judging these animals.

Various counties may establish their own weight and age requirements, so I won't discuss those issues but instead leave that to your local fair officials. The official ARBA requirements are for all animals (single fryers and each member of a meat pen) to be not over 10 weeks of age and weigh between 3 to 5 pounds. Stewer and roaster classes exist, but I won't discuss those now as they aren't normally stressed as much in the junior fair programs.

When looking at a single fryer, 45 points of the 100 point schedule are given to meat type. Normally the best fryers are those with a short, compact body that is very well filled and possesses solid, firm flesh. The hindquarters are the most important area of the fryer's body, followed by the loin and then the forequarters. If we see protruding hips or feel a bony area up the spine, these are some serious faults. Two fryers sitting side by side... one with a long body type, protruding hips, and rough flesh condition...the other with a short body type, very full throughout, and solid flesh...the difference is night and day.

Behind meat type, condition of flesh carries 35 points. As I previously said, the flesh should be solid and smooth. No bony feeling anywhere on the body. We also don't want to see any looseness or flabbiness of flesh. Think solid!

While we don't eat the fur, it does carry 20 points. You might consider this the icing on the cake.

When looking at meat pens (normally pens of 3), we look at the same aspects of the single fryer only with an additional area of concern...uniformity of body and weight. In meat pens, meat type carries 40 points, condition of flesh 30 points, uniformity of body and weight 20 points, and fur 10 points. Finding this "uniformity" is probably the most difficult part of showing meat pens. I have found so many pens where 2 animals are just wonderful only to have the third member of the pen be much weaker. Basically, you want 3 identical animals...same weight, same size, same quality, same everything. This is hard to find...especially in the summer time when most fairs occur.

Regardless of whether you are showing a single fryer or meat pen, selection is very important. Many times it is mistakenly thought that the biggest animals are always the best for meat. Not so! You might find a 5 pound animal that is long in type and not developed well in the hips. This animal has the size but not the meat qualities we need. Beside that animal sits another; it may weigh only 4 pounds, but it is a shorter, more compact body type that is well developed throughout. The point I'm trying to make is... don't always assume bigger is better. Maybe the bigger animal is better in some cases, but don't always automatically assume so.

In summary, when selecting your fryer or meat pen, remember meat type is the most important aspect. Short, compact bodies that are well filled are desired. The animal should be solid in flesh with no bony effect or softness of flesh. We don't eat the fur, but it does carry some points. And with the meat pens, look for a pen that has all 3 animals as identical as possible. That's uniformity...or some may call it balance. Have fun at your fair...and good luck!