

# A Cut Above. Evaluating Meat Pens



by ARBA Judge Caleb Thomas

*As breeders and judges we may not see many, or any, commercial classes at all-breed sanctioned shows throughout most of the year. However, for 2-3 months out of the year as we enter the "Fair Season" these are generally the largest classes we encounter at county and state fairs. Considering we may encounter very few the remaining 9-10 months of the year; how does one prepare for this 2-3 month season where you may find 40 meat pens at a show?*

**R**emember there is a great deal riding on the placement of meat pens at fairs. For example, the Indiana State Fair Grand Champion meat pen could sell for between \$4,000 to 15,000; the second place may go for \$250 while the third place meat pen could receive \$4/pound and a white ribbon. In a class of 25 meat pens, consider the disparaging difference between the price for 1st and 2nd place as well as the impact on the young people exhibiting these meat pens.

## BACKGROUND

The ARBA removed the dressed carcass classes from the ARBA Standard of Perfection in the early 1990's. Similar to reading a story, this was the equivalent of removing the "last chapter in the book" of commercial classes. To explain this analogy, once the commercial class animals are dressed you can truly see and experience the end product; the very purpose of our commercial classes. At that time I reached out to John Keenan, a judge and commercial expert, to gain his perspective for evaluating carcass rabbits. I also spoke on several occasions with Oren Reynolds who not only was an expert judge but retired from the meat industry. I did not want to lose this opportunity to learn more about what I feared could become a lost science. I wanted to start dressing out rabbits, and learn more about how to identify reduced waste and increased efficiency on live rabbits. Note the focus was not as

much on feed efficiency study, rather on producing the most productive carcass for meat pens and fryers; what would be provided to the consumer. We also tasted the meat from 3 pound, 4 pound and 5 pound live weight fryers, determining that size was less the issue as a quality 70 day animal. I also learned a great deal from listening to ARBA Judge and Animal Science professor- Dr. Scott Williamson. Dr. Williamson is the head of the Swine Department at California State University-Fresno and possesses a great deal of insight regarding livestock classes. Whether we are considering rabbits, swine, sheep, goats, or cattle; the concepts and ideals remain consistent.

## PERSPECTIVE

Look at commercial class meat rabbits as an industry. Consider the following categories of 1-Producer, 2-Processor, and 3-Consumer. Producers wish to raise rabbits in the shortest time and least expense to have them ready for the processor. The processor wants animals that provide the most desirable product with the least amount of waste. Consumers want fresh, tender cuts of meat; a valued end product. A judge is evaluating animals at the "day" when a producer would be sending them to the processor. Consider the commercial classes as "terminal" classes. The names themselves explain their purpose- Meat Pen, Fryer, Roaster, and Stewer. There are no promising animals in these classes, the promise has already been made. Judges must consider these animals as though they leave the judging table and are going to be processed and on the dinner table that day.

November/December Feature



**A loin that narrows down the hindquarters does not carry the volume of product it should. A narrow loin will not satisfy the customer**



**Wide-well-filled loin, a well sprung and deep ribcage is necessary to sustain development for a prime 70 day old fryer.**

**A shallow loin will not yield enough meat to satisfy the ARBA SOP**



### **ADHERENCE TO THE STANDARD**

Separating the meat from the offal: My wife may shoot me for sharing her acronym she uses to help prepare her 4-H'ers, but imitation is the sincerest form of flattery. MCUF- Meat type, Condition of flesh, Uniformity of body and weight, then Fur.

The primary consideration must be MEAT TYPE-structure, soundness, and the highest percentage of high quality meat vs. bone and belly. It is a common practice to put paramount importance on the top line and other attributes that are not as significant as the all important meat coverage. The loin must be wide, deep/thick without taper.

Inspect the rear legs, "how far does the meat go down the leg?" Another area to consider that is often overlooked is the front leg meat. At any dinner table, Mom usually gets the short end of the stick. Keep Mom in mind as she usually gets



**A well-filled midsection, and loin, along with adequate depth are necessary in order to produce meat and to contribute the necessary dress out percentage.**

# Evaluating Meat Pens (cont)

the front legs; ensure that the meat is well developed and carries down the front legs. Although bone density is all offal (waste), a well sprung and deep ribcage is necessary to sustain development for a prime 70 day old fryer. Inspect the ribcage girth to insure that you have a sound meat producing animal. Heavier bone, bigger heads, thicker ears and hide are also sources of offal. The end goal is to have as high a dress out percentage of quality meat as possible; 60% dress out is a realistic and desirable objective.



**Weak hindquarters**



**Well-filled hindquarters**



**The primary consideration must be meat type structure. Inspect the rear legs and note how far the meat goes down the leg.**

**CONDITION OF FLESH** is important as it lends itself to not only the quality of the meat, but also the dress out percentage. Remember, this is a terminal class and animals with great potential when they are more prime have already missed the mark (they are promised for today). Softer flesh, potty fryers or even those possessing a heavy belly will produce more offal when dressed by the processor. Less prime fryers have more water waste than those with firm flesh and tighter bellies. The ARBA Standard of Perfection defines prime as “an animal that exhibits ideal condition of flesh and coat”. A trim fryer with no gut, firm flesh, and tight hide is the ideal example of prime condition. Note that there is a difference between a tight hide and one that had begun to thicken. A good place to check the hide thickness is over the shoulder.

Oftentimes judges and leaders focus all too much on UNIFORMITY. Keep in mind that three rabbits weighing five pounds each does not mean that the pen is uniform. Also note that “uniformity of body and weight” is 3rd in point allocation according to the ARBA Standard of Perfection. Consider size, appearance, weight, meat type, condition of flesh and fur when assessing uniformity; it’s not all about the scale! Your best single fryer may not come from your best meat pen, uniformity can be impacted by one outstanding animal in a pen with two average animals.

**FUR** is allocated the least number of points, however note that when you have stiff competition every point does count. The fur should conform to that breed’s Standard of Perfection and be consistent on the three fryers in a meat pen. Reiterating my comment earlier, your best single fryer may not come from the winning meat pen; single fryers have 10 additional points allocated to fur.

## **FOOD FOR THOUGHT**

Just as each breed standard was written to support the purpose for each breed, the standards for our Commercial Classes were written with the same “form following function” perspective in mind. As part of our informal research and efforts to produce the best possible fryers and meat pens, we regularly tasted the meat to observe differences. Fryers were prepared by the same cook using the same method. All in all, 70 days is the optimal age for fryers to have the superior dress out percentage, dressing ease, and most important-TASTE. When dressed, these carcasses are glossy with a

thinner, firmer texture. You can observe distinct differences in fryers at 75-76 days. Hides tend to thicken at 72 days along with head, ears and bone. Over 72 days old, the carcasses tend to dry out when dressed as the meat is more sinewy and has a thicker texture; thus producing a chewier meat for the consumer. These "over done" fryers are not going to be the ideal product for consumers who expect tender cuts. Note that the Roaster and Stewer classes allocate 30 points to fur, essentially a third of the points. These classes are nearly as focused on satisfying the fur market as they are meat consumption.

When asked about acceptable breeds and weights my response is generally to select and breed a line that epitomizes the commercial ideal outlined in the ARBA Standard of Perfection. Although it may take less time for a Flemish Giant to attain the 4 ¾-5 pound optimal weight, due to skeletal development you will not achieve the optimum 60% dress out percentage. Please note that I am not saying that any breed is inferior, rather to consider the realistic objectives for ARBA Commercial Classes and select stock that has been developed for these specific industry demands. In speaking with ARBA Commercial Department Chair, Terry Grubb, processors are not seeking 3 pound fryers. Most requests for fryers start at 4 pounds.

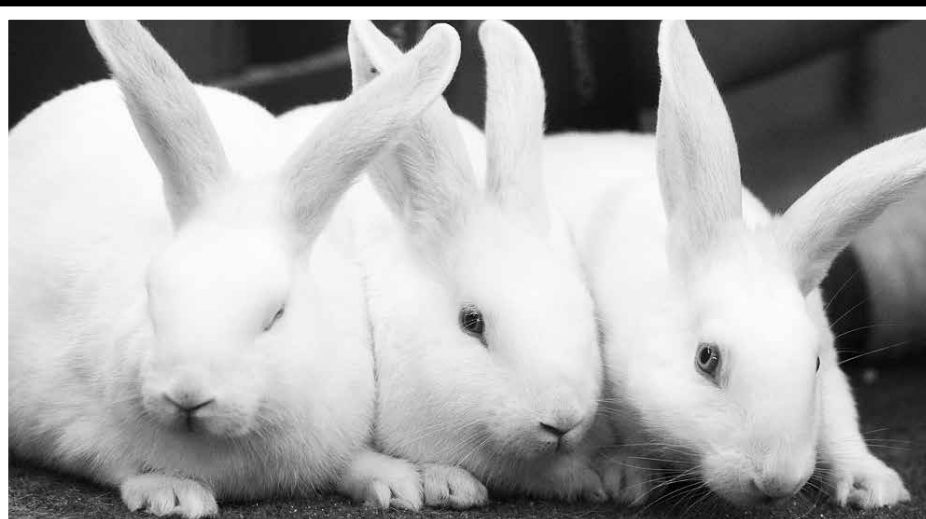
As I close it is important to mention that I do recognize many meat pens may not end up in a pan at the close of each fair. However, just because many meat pens are not consumed does not mean the ARBA Standard of Perfection nor the concepts behind the standards changed. As dutiful stewards of the ARBA, judges are charged with fully understanding and executing these standards to the best of their ability whether judging at an ARBA National Convention or local 4-H Fair. I understand the quandary we all face with meat pen class "Feast or Famine". Careful study and preparation prior to each fair season will help to insure that we all put our best foot forward and ensure the best consumer product is Grand Champion meat pen. After all, many of these entrants are the result of year-long efforts made by young people who will be our future judges and commercial producers. Let us all reward their efforts by remaining a "Cut Above".



**Check ribcage spring and depth**



**Evaluate hide thickness and front legs**



**The ARBA Standard of Perfection defines prime as "an animal that exhibits ideal condition of flesh and coat". A trim fryer with no gut, firm flesh, and tight hide is the ideal example of prime condition.**



*Evaluating Meat Pens by judge Caleb Thomas continues to be the most requested re-printing of any ARBA Domestic Rabbit magazine article.*