



## 100 Years Later, Students Say Meat Judging Is Still About More Than the Contest

For 100 years, intercollegiate meat judging has asked students to do something that sounds simple: evaluate a class, make a decision and defend it.

Ask current and recent participants what they gained from the experience, however, and the answers quickly move beyond carcasses, cuts and contest scores.

They talk about confidence. Discipline. Friendships. Long van rides. Learning how to recover when they get something wrong. Meeting people who change the direction of their careers. And, perhaps most often, becoming part of a community that stays with them long after their final contest.

As AMSA celebrates 100 years of intercollegiate meat judging, five students and young professionals reflected on what the program has given them and why they believe it still matters.

### Learning to trust yourself

For Grace Bryson, meat judging changed the way she approaches decisions.

Before joining a team, she describes herself as incredibly indecisive and unsure of her abilities. Judging forced her to work through that discomfort.

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*"Stepping into the cooler for the first time, I was pushed to think critically under pressure, trust in my teaching, and make decisions based on reasoning rather than hesitation," Bryson said.*

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Over time, that lesson extended far beyond the cooler. She learned that confidence does not simply appear. It develops through repeatedly doing something difficult, making a decision and being willing to learn from the result.

Clint Lee points to many of the same skills. Meat judging taught him to communicate under pressure, trust his decision-making and develop the discipline required to keep improving through early mornings and long practices. Now, as a coach, he sees another layer of the experience.

"Looking back, a lot of the life skills I use today honestly started in the meat lab," Lee said.

He credits judging with teaching him how to encourage others, hold teammates accountable and help create a culture where everyone is working toward improvement.

Joe Kennah remembers the sheer commitment required. Practices, travel and contests created expectations that initially seemed overwhelming. By the end of the season, those expectations had become routine.

His team eventually looked back and asked themselves, "How did we pull that off?"

For Kennah, that realization was as important as any contest result. It showed how much they had grown in a relatively short period of time.

## **The memories are often not about the placing**

Contest results matter. These are competitors, after all. But when asked what memories stand out most, the students repeatedly returned to people rather than placings.

Ryan Heitschmidt remembers the night before the International, the final contest of his team's season. His coaches asked him to prepare a celebratory speech during their last road trip. He wrote about each teammate and coach, recalling their successes, funniest moments and what each person had contributed to the team.

Looking back on the highs and lows of the season brought home something bigger.

We were not just a team; we were a family," Heitschmidt said.

Kennah's memory involves considerably worse weather.

During winter workout, his team was returning to Laramie after a full day at JBS Greeley when a blizzard closed Interstate 80. They sat on the highway until around 1 a.m. before being escorted into Laramie by highway patrol.

Stranded together for hours, Kennah remembers feeling as though the teammates had learned nearly everything about one another. The difficult trip became one of the experiences that showed him how quickly judging teammates could become lifelong friends.

Chesney Effling has seen that connection from both sides, first as a competitor and later as a coach. At the International with the team she coached, one student wrote and read a poem about the group before the banquet.

For Effling, the moment reinforced something that can get lost when scores and rankings receive the attention.

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*"Meat judging is not all about winning, but about the memories and relationships we make along the way."*  
Chesney Effling

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## **Opening doors students did not know existed**

Those relationships often lead somewhere else: a career.

Lee entered college interested in livestock production. Meat judging helped him understand carcass value, product quality and how decisions made on the live-animal side affect the final product.

It also changed his professional direction.

"A lot of the professional relationships and opportunities I have today started because of meat judging," he said.

His experience as both a teammate and coach also helped him recognize how much he enjoys mentoring others, something he now wants to incorporate into his career.

Bryson came to judging with very limited awareness of meat science or the meat industry. Traveling to major processing facilities, meeting industry leaders and seeing meat science in practice changed that.

She began to understand the connections among agriculture, business, food production, research and innovation, along with the range of careers available within them.

Effling's experience pointed her toward academia. The educators and coaches she encountered became examples of the kind of influence she hopes to have on students in her own career.

Heitschmidt has followed a similar path. Coaches and mentors encouraged him to pursue internships, additional competitions and higher education. Now a graduate student and coach, he has the opportunity to provide that same encouragement to another generation.

## A team, a university and a much larger family

The students also describe strong connections to their universities.

At the University of Georgia, Lee says the program's relatively small size helps create a close-knit environment among students, coaches, faculty, alumni and industry supporters.

At the University of Wyoming, Kennah sees that support stretching well beyond campus. Alumni, educators and community members from across the state follow the program and take pride in its students.

Bryson feels the weight of tradition each time she represents Oklahoma State University.

"When you walk into a cooler wearing an OSU hardhat, you not only represent yourself and your current team, but a century of teams who competed before you," she said.

That history brings both pride and responsibility.

## Why it still matters

After 100 years, the technical side of meat judging remains important. Students still learn carcass evaluation, composition, quality, yield and specifications.

But the students themselves make a strong case that its lasting value is much broader.

It prepares people to make decisions. To communicate. To work with others. To handle pressure. To meet people outside their own university. To understand an industry from a perspective they may never have encountered otherwise.

Effling may have summarized it best.

"At its core, meat judging is about developing young people."

The contests will continue to produce champions. But a century of meat judging suggests the bigger result is found in the people who leave the cooler more confident, more connected and better prepared for whatever comes next.

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*"Looking back, a lot of the skills I used today honestly started in the meat lab."* Clint Lee

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