

Top Hand – Gaining Experience

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During the fall of 2022 and spring of 2023, around 65 of Georgia's high school students have become more proficient processing cows and calves. We, as the UGA Beef Team, have learned a lot over the course of the last year about the role our high school aged students can play in the cattle industry and their impact going forward.

We have learned that there are a lot of young people that are interested in the beef industry and learning the proper chute side processing techniques. However, most young people that we have met have no experience at all working cattle and particularly at a level where they would feel comfortable with someone evaluating them. At the same time, we have learned that very few have an opportunity to gain hands-on experience on their own. In a nutshell, there are a lot of factors that limit the involvement of young people in the beef cattle industry. The good news is that through the collective efforts of local GCA chapters and its producers, UGA Extension, and FFA chapters, we now have a great opportunity to prepare Georgia's youth for the beef industry in a fun and encouraging environment using the Top Hand Stockmanship and Stewardship program. The rules, judging criteria and tutorial videos can be found in the educational programs tab at ugabeef.com.

The challenge of limited experience can be resolved in multiple ways. First, the contests are designed for folks to gain experience. You do not need to be a pro to get involved. Although prior practice and a BQA certification are required, this is often not a problem with a little planning. This is where the beef cattle community, Extension and Ag Educators can come together to offer various opportunities for youth as well as novice adults. Local producers are often very willing to host interested teams in their communities. Another option to help address this issue is to host a hands-on field day in your community. The UGA Beef Team offered two Hands-On Field Days in the spring of 2023 that were held at the Alapaha Beef Cattle Research Unit and the Double Bridges Teaching Unit located near Athens. During these field days, Dylan Davis, Youth Livestock Extension Specialist, utilized ears harvested from a processing plant to give students a safe opportunity to tag ears for the first time (see Figure 1). They were frozen after collection, and then thawed just prior to being attached to wooden pallets and used for a tagging demo and practice.

Students learned to mix modified live vaccines (see Figure 2) using old vaccines that were no longer of any value. Participants were also taught the differences between commonly utilized vaccines and the importance of reading the handling and administration labels.



Figure 1 (left) and 2 (right). Students learning how to tag and vaccinate cattle.

We also utilized a bovine injection simulator to teach those that had not given shots before prior to giving live injections (see Figure 3). Team members also walked students through chute side safety and use prior to working calves through the system.



Figure 3: Students also learned how to give shots following proper procedures.

Interested groups, regardless of affiliation, could replicate these activities in their communities to help youth and novice cattle producers gain confidence. Please contact your UGA Extension Agent if you would like to get in contact with us regarding creating your own Hands-On Field Day.

In 2023, 16 teams of high school students competed in the Top Hand Stockmanship and Stewardship contest supported by UGA and GCA. For 2024, we are targeting the following dates. Please note that that the Top Hand contests are now open to 8th graders as well.

- Wednesday, April 10th – Alapaha
- Wednesday, April 17th – Carrollton
- Monday, April 22th – Athens

Top Hand State Championship Teams were highlighted at two recent events.

The 2023 Top Hand State Champions were highlighted during each day of Sunbelt Ag Expo. Mikayla, Grace, and Madeleine performed a mock demonstration where they followed a protocol like the previous contests' format. They applied visual tags, EID tags, took TSU samples, administered subcutaneous injections and applied pour-on dewormer. They had an average audience of 50 people each day.

At the November Cattlemen's Connection Quarterly Meeting in Athens, The Oglethorpe County High School team, Jorge Padilla, Ricardo Padilla, and Carlos Padilla, utilized their Stockmanship and Stewardship skills to hold a mock-contest style demonstration for the 50 attendees. The team did a fantastic job working through three head of cattle, showcasing proper application of tags, injections and handling.

The UGA Beef Team, UGA Agents, GCA and College of Veterinary Medicine have come together to offer this unique program that was patterned after Virginia Tech's Stockman Contest. The Georgia Commodity Commission for Beef and NCBA have been essential supporters of our efforts. Our Allied Industry partners include Neogen Animal Health, Boehringer Ingelheim, and Zoetis. It takes a lot of resources to provide high quality tools, pharmaceuticals, meals, and awards. We also owe a huge thanks to our host for 2023 including the Double Bridges Teaching Unit with manager Kaleb Marchant, Alapaha Beef Cattle Research Unit with manager Andy Dunn, and the following folks from Carroll County- Carroll Co. Cattlemen's, Carroll County Extension, Eric Thompson, Ben Hicks.

