Feeding Show Animals and Poultry - Science or Art?
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I have spent many years being educated and trained in livestock nutrition. I also have spent my entire life feeding show cattle, hogs, sheep, poultry, goats and horses. For the rest of this article I will use the term 'show animals' to represent all of the above.

So, my question to you is: “Is the practice of feeding show animals a science or an art?” In my years of practicing livestock nutrition and feeding show animals, I am firmly convinced that it is both a science and an art. The problem that I see over and over is too many people think they know more than years of independent scientific nutrition research. What they end up doing is believing they are ‘show animal feeding artists’ but really it is more like ‘Hocus Pocus’, ‘Foo Foo Dust’, or just down right ‘Black Magic’ that they practice on show animals.

Let’s start with horses. Have you ever been in a show horse barn during feeding time? Usually, in or along side the feed room there are tubs, buckets, cups, bags, and every other kind of container you can think of and each one has different mystical ingredients that they believe will make their show horses the best around. One part of feeding horses that is an art is that you have to not only take into account the stage of development, gender, size and weight of the horse, but also the amount of work that a particular horse is doing. We usually think of horse work as light, moderate or heavy. This has a major impact on how much to feed and the nutrient density of the diet required to meet all nutritional requirements.

Of all show animals, horses have the most sensitive digestion system known to mankind. A pinch of this, a dab of that, and a sprinkle of the really secret stuff, and then bow to the east! A misstep here or there and they are on the phone to their veterinarian or the animal morgue. There are many reputable feed companies that more than 95% of the people would be better off just buying a quality horse feed from, feeding it (and only it), and some quality hay or forage. Many people think that they have to have alfalfa hay for horses. Alfalfa is usually high quality forage that is excellent for feeding to horses except (and this is a big except) if it is grown south of the Mason Dixon Line. Most people have never even heard of a blister beetle, but they thrive below the Mason Dixon Line. It only takes one-third of a single blister beetle to kill a really big horse. I usually recommend high quality Bermuda grass hay for feeding horses (no worries). In fact, if I could only pick one feedstuff to feed horses it would be oats. They are probably the safest thing to feed horses and way better than ‘Foo Foo Dust’.

The ‘art of feeding’ show pigs is right up there with horses. Thank goodness their digestive system is a little tougher than horses. Just take a look at the miracle
‘nutritional’ products available on-line or in show pig magazines. You could buy one new swine feeding product every day for a year and you still would not have purchased all the possibilities. Again, I reiterate, the vast majority of people would be so much better off purchasing a quality show pig feed from a reputable company and simply feed that one feed. I have seen many times over ‘feed artists’ causing diarrhea, lameness, or pigs to go off feed by being too ‘artful’ in their show pig feeding madness. A great example of this is Paylean. Paylean has to be one of the most misused and abused nutritional products ever fed. There are federal guidelines and laws that limit the amount that can be fed to pigs. Many people disregard those laws and even the legal amounts are way too much in most cases for quality show pigs.

Yes, there are ‘artists’ out there feeding show lambs too. Maybe not quite as many, but they are still there. Lambs have the tendency to go off their feed fairly easily. It is always better when feeding lambs to make very few changes in their diets and, if changes have to be made, make them very gradually over time. Never make a big change without a transition period. There are quality pelleted show lamb feeds available but I have always preferred quality all grain show lamb feeds over pelleted. If a quality all grain show lamb feed is consistent from bag to bag, it is very hard to beat. I have always been amazed what the show lamb feeding ‘artists’ feed during a show. If you have ever walked through a show barn after a sheep show, you would think that a nursing home or some retirement community for elderly people has just had their annual conference.

I have not seen quite the antics in art feeding goats yet. Give them time and they will catch up. I would like to pass on a couple of tips though on feeding goats. When feeding wethers, always, and I mean always purchase a feed with ammonium chloride in it. If you do not, you will get to experience a real nasty and painful procedure (painful for the wether) trying to crush, push, and/or cut calcium stones through the urethra. It took me a while to believe that they would turn their nose up at lush Bermuda grass in favor of old coarse poor hay, although they did have a sweet tooth for alfalfa. My kids loved raising and feeding their goat projects. They became more pets than livestock projects. I have a real soft spot in my heart about their first goat projects because they got them from Dr. John Sullivan. I have always looked up to and admired Dr. John and he was always so helpful to anybody that asked. Our kids loved their goats so much that I think there is still one of their wethers (exhibited in 2000) retired and living on their Granddad’s farm in Florida.

Show cattle feeding ‘artists’ are not exempted from this article either. Until I knew better (when I was really young), I was one of those ‘artists’ too. The thing that usually keeps these ‘artists’ from noticing as many problems with some of their nutritional shenanigans is that most show heifers, bulls and steers can tolerate a little more ‘artistical’ nonsense than their non-ruminant brethren. I wish I had 0.0001 % of the profit that has been made off the beet pulp and Red Cell fed to show cattle. If I just had that 0.0001 %, I would not be writing this article right now because I would be somewhere in the Keys on a really nice boat catching really good eating fish. Like feeding most other show animals, the cattle ‘artists’ would be much better off just feeding a quality feed from a reputable company and a quality hay.
Dr. Lavergne (our Editor of this newsletter) is probably wondering whether she should print this article in our newsletter. Since I am going to also comment on feeding poultry, it might be the last straw for her and you may never get to read this article. I started feeding show broilers when I was 9 years old (that is a long time ago). The first broilers I fed were entered into a New York Style Dressed Broiler Show. We had to bleed the birds, pluck them, and then show five of them hanging on hooks in a cooler side by side. It usually took about 20-25 birds before you got five plucked that the skin was not torn anywhere or there were no bruises or too many pin feathers, or etc. etc. etc. If you can tolerate all that, you must really enjoy raising and feeding broilers. Over the years our broiler feeding ‘art’ form changed many times. We went through phases of cooking corn, corn gluten meal, milk and corn concoctions, and others I won’t mention. My broiler raising claim to fame was placing 3rd in the Houston Livestock Show out of 1400 pens of broilers. Hey, that sounds pretty good until I tell you my best friend had Grand Champion Broilers that year and got - wait, wait, wait - don’t rush, drum roll please, $60,000 for a pen of broilers. Over all those years and all the years of my children raising and feeding show poultry, I came to realize that the science aspect of feeding show animals is way more important than the art. I taught my kids a lot about feeding calves, goats, pigs, and poultry. Of all their show animal projects I sincerely believe they learned as much or more about the science and the art of feeding show animals with their poultry projects. With a six to seven week project, you better get every day right nutritionally. In fact, you better get every hour right nutritionally or someone (probably my kids) is going to beat you.

I have not tried to make anyone a nutritionist with the ramblings in this article. I am not criticizing anyone as well because I have been right in there with all you ‘artists’. I just wanted to share some observations I have made over all these years and hope to bring a little common sense and levity to this really important topic. One thing I did not even touch on but should really mention - the most important nutrient for any living creature is water! Our show animals (in fact all animals) must have clean, fresh water at all times if you ever hope to reach anywhere near that animal’s genetic potential. If I can ever help you with the science or art of feeding show animals, please do not hesitate to call. Merry Christmas.

P.S.  **Artisan Page’s Magic Potion** (No Charge)
1 Quart of Big Red Strawberry Soda Pop  
1 Pint of Red Apple Cider Vinegar (Has to be Red)  
3 Tablespoons of ground coffee  
Mix and refrigerate. Pour 1 cup on each feeding for show animals (cattle, pigs, lambs, goats) to increase feed intake for those animals that are off feed or not consuming as much as needed (DO NOT feed to horses or poultry please). Don’t bother asking me why or how this Magic Potion works (and it always works) because I’m not telling (science or art?). You’re welcome.