

Fair Game

One of the funnest times of my life was when I took my “show string” of four heifers to a junior show about seven hours from home. I went with a buddy who showed two Holstein heifers. Normally I would not lower myself to fraternize with a dairyman but he had one good quality about him: his father hauled us there and back.

Because we'd be showing in the junior and open shows, which were a week apart, we'd be living for two weeks without parental supervision on a fairgrounds! For a kid it just doesn't get any better than that! Except on show days, all we had to do was feed and muck out our heifers and the rest of the time we explored every inch of the fairgrounds.

Our favorite spot was the dairy pavilion where every two hours they'd herd three Holstein cows into a stage-like milking parlor. During each milking they gave away 10 milk shakes to the folks who came closest to guessing the milk production of each cow. And let me tell you, these were the very BEST milk shakes EVER!

It was at this point in my life when I learned the importance of good record keeping. Because they were rotating the same 20 cows through the milking parlor it soon became obvious to us that by writing down the neck chain of each cow and her production we could estimate their milk production with a high degree of accuracy. This was a far better system than the one used by the vast majority of fairgoers who would try to estimate the pounds produced by looking at the cow's udders. Stupid city people!

We laughed at their ignorance as we drank the liquid nirvana. Soon we were drinking a big chocolate milk shake apiece every two hours. To any readers who would criticize our methods I would just remind you of the words of that great American, W.C Fields: “A thing worth having is a thing worth cheating for.”

Yes sir, we were a couple grinning teenagers until the dairymen running the exhibit got tired of feeding us milkshakes. They thought they'd fool us by switching the neck chains of the cows but by then our familiarity with the cows and their color patterns was pretty thorough and our

winning streak at the milkshake pay window continued. Until they banned us completely from the competition, that is.

We missed those shakes so much that we considered taking the dairy officials all the way to the Supreme Court, if it meant we could get our milkshakes back. But they were not intimidated and told us that if we wanted the shakes we could buy them like all the other fairgoers. But that was against everything I stood for. It was, and still is, against my principles to pay for something when I can get it for free. Besides, we didn't have much money, barely enough to afford the corn dogs and sticky cinnamon buns we were surviving on for the duration of the fair.

We moped around like a couple brothers whose pup had just been run over until they started another contest in the dairy barn. They put several soon-to-calve cows in a loafing shed and the 10 people who came closest to guessing when the next cow would calve got one of the milkshakes. The problem was that I could not see any way to cheat. Their calving was not as predictable as the cow's milk production and we suffered terribly as a result. We were having chocolate milkshake withdrawals.

Towards the end of our stay my buddy started winning a milkshake or two a day. Knowing his reputation (and lack of integrity), I just knew he'd found a way to cheat. Especially when he was separated from his two show heifers for extended periods.

Come to find out, he had bribed the dairy herdsman for inside information about the pregnant cows by offering to muck out the loafing shed once a day. My buddy not only would not share the inside scoop on the calvy cows, he wouldn't even offer me a scoop of the delectable milkshakes he won.

This taught me a very important lesson early in my business career: Never partner with a person who doesn't cheat fairly.