

The making of a county fair champion

A COUPLE years ago, my great college and cattle-showing friend, Jane, was out in the barn with her daughter, Nicki, when she overheard the 5-year-old giving her heifer a pep talk.

Nicki leaned in and spoke quietly but confidently into her calf's ear: "If you want to be a champion, you have to act like a champion!"



My Generation
By HOLLY SPANGLER

Now, there are two points to take home here. First, this apple did not fall far from the tree. My friend, Jane

Adolph, is, bar none, the most competitive person I know. A rabid Illini fan, she takes it personally when they lose. It is not a coincidence that her daughter named her calf "Springfield." The child has aspirations.

Second, Nicki needs an outlet for her competitive spirit. Her parents are wisely providing one through cattle

production. Like her mother before her, Nicki will grow up showing cattle at the Carroll County Fair. She'll win some, she'll lose some, she'll learn a lot. Her young life will be shaped by the lessons she'll take away from the show ring. Someday, she'll look back and, like her mother before her and like myself, be unable to imagine her life without the backdrop of a fair.

This is what county fairs do for our kids. It's what they did for us, and for our parents and grandparents before us.

Oh, the lessons we learned

When I spent my summers stacking racks upon racks of hay and straw, I learned about supply and demand. Showing a dozen or more Shorthorns at county fairs all over southern Illinois demanded a lot of hay and straw. I had to help supply it.

Cleaning stalls for that many head seemed like a never-ending job, particularly when you're The Slowest Person Ever at cleaning stalls. It's disheartening to be sorting straw where the first animal stood, and barely be able to see all the way to the stall where the 24th animal stood. But therein lay a lesson in persistence. Take 2 on persistence came the next day when we had to rinse all 24 of them. Again.

And it doesn't take long for a fair kid to figure out that hard work and persistence don't guarantee trophies.

Life isn't fair. And that's OK, because you've always got your friends. By the time my buddies and I made it to high school, the county fair was the highlight of the summer. We spent the days working hard, throwing water and kicking the dust around the show box with the good farm kids we enjoyed the most. And when the work was done, we'd pile into the backs of pickups to watch the harness races, betting nickels on our picks to win.

Even today, I'm still close with my county fair girlfriends. Consoling a friend whose major love interest just threw up on her on The Paratrooper is one of those things that sort of bonds you together.

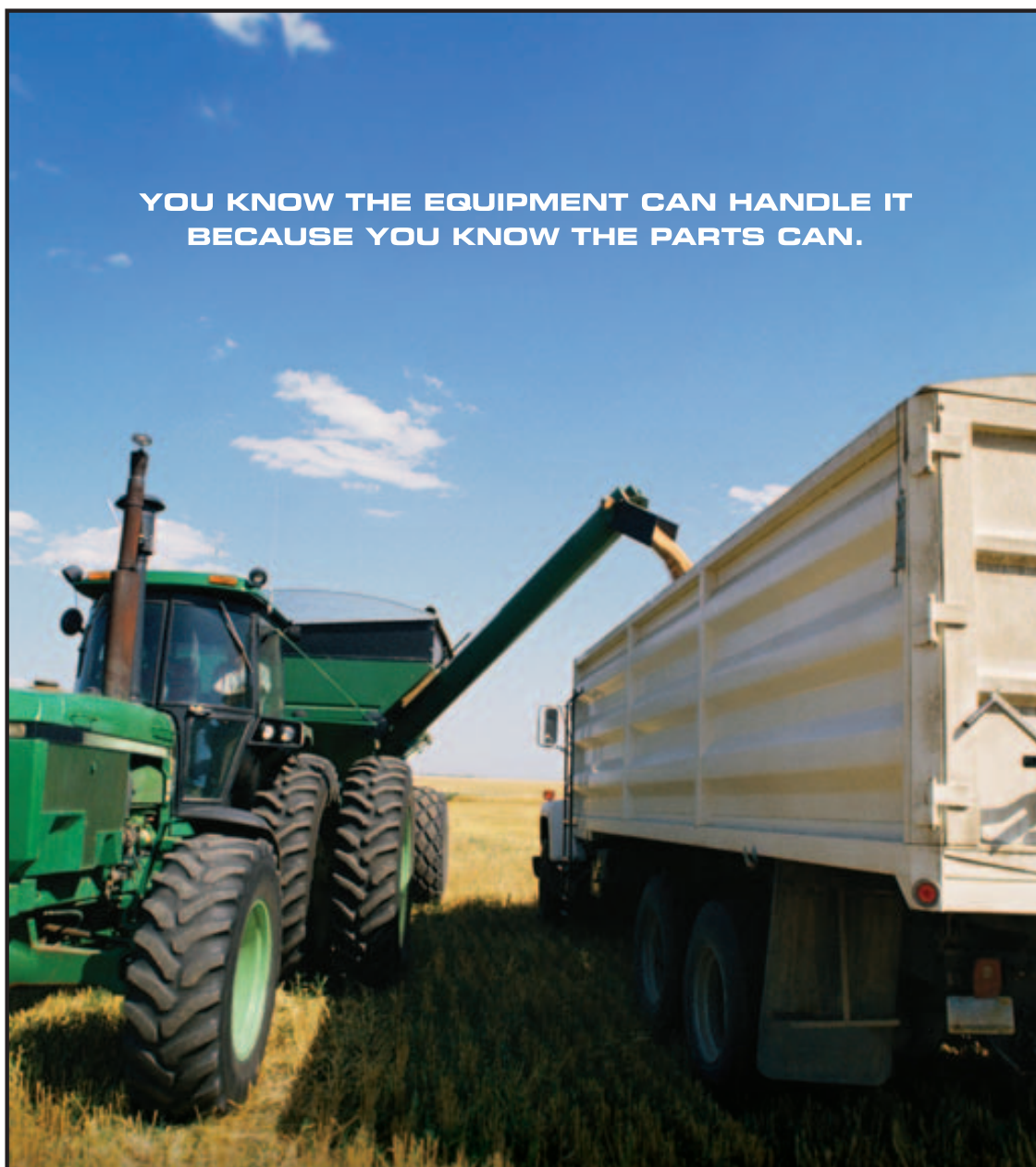
There's a whole lot that makes a county fair special, and there are a whole lot of county fairs on the financial bubble because Illinois has a budget deficit. Rod Blagojevich began siphoning off appropriated county fair money years ago, and today fairs get less than half the funding state law says they should receive (see story on Page 5).

County fairs are worth saving. The problem, of course, is that there's a lot worth saving in Illinois and not enough money to do it. Our new governor has his hands full cleaning up the carnival-ride-gone-bad mess of the previous administration. But it's up to us to make our case. Even if they can't reinstate full reimbursement levels this year, we need to continue to press for next year.

Young farm kids like Nicki deserve the same lessons we learned — and the fun we had.

■ Comments? E-mail hspangler@farmprogress.com.

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