



# 4-H POULTRY SHOW- MANSHIP

**NATIONAL  
STANDARD**

**University of California**  
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### **Acknowledgment**

The authors thank the California State Fair for providing the venue for many of this publication's photographs. While frequent mention is made to 4-H in this publication, the national standard for poultry showmanship has been successfully used with youth involved in FFA and independent livestock projects. The authors encourage the adoption of this standard by all youth poultry projects.

#### **Showmen Are Not Always Males!**

This publication uses the words *showmanship* and *showmen* to refer to members in competitions. Yet both males and females, young men and young women, participate equally and fully in competition. We use these terms because they are customary and widely accepted, not to imply that showmen are always males.

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# 4-H POULTRY SHOWMANSHIP

## NATIONAL STANDARD

**P**oultry showmanship begins long before the competition. The time and effort spent by members in properly caring for their birds and training them for showmanship will be reflected on the day of the competition. The activities in the competition give members the opportunity to present their birds in their best light. In addition, members must learn to follow instructions, speak before an audience, and maintain a poised and professional manner throughout the event.

### **SELECTING YOUR SHOWMANSHIP BIRD**

While every breed has characteristics that make it desirable to certain people, not all breeds of poultry (chickens, turkeys, ducks, and geese) are suitable for showmanship. In general, it is recommended that showmen use chickens, preferably bantam chickens. If a bantam or miniature chicken is used, there is less animal to control and less animal to hold. Using a turkey, a heavy or medium-weight duck, or a goose can cause problems because of their size and strength.

Not all bantam chicken breeds are easy to show. The very short-legged breeds, such as the Japanese bantams, may be quite calm birds but may not walk well. In general, avoid crested breeds. Due to the large number of feathers that drop down from the top of the bird's head and into its face, these birds cannot see well,

are easily frightened, and often fly off the showmanship table.

Given the above recommendations, the reader may be surprised to see turkeys, waterfowl, and crested breeds pictured in this manual. Again, these tend not to be the best birds for showmanship. However, for a variety of reasons some members may only be able to show such birds. They have therefore been included in this publication.

Several bantam breeds tend to be very showy, that is, they seem to be naturals at posing and walking down the showmanship table. These include Old English Game Bantams, Sebrights, and Rose Combs. These breeds may not be the ones you wish to work with for your breeding projects. It is common for showmen to raise one breed for their breeding projects and keep one or two birds of another breed just for showmanship.

Most showmen use standard bred poultry, that is, breeds that meet the requirements of the American Poultry Association and the American Bantam Association as described in their excellent books, *The American Standard of Perfection* and *Bantam Standard*. If you have only production-type poultry (commercial egg-laying hens or meat chicken crosses) available to you, you may have to work even harder at getting them ready for showmanship, because these birds have been selected for their production capabilities (number of eggs they lay or fast growth). They have not been bred to be show birds.



Whatever breed you choose to use, the bird should be

- In good health (bright red comb and wattles, bright eyes, good fleshing, alert)
- Free from parasites (lice, mites, etc.)
- Clean
- True to its breed and variety in terms of conformation, size, color, etc.

## TRAINING YOUR BIRD

Birds will respond to kind handling and repeated practicing of the desired behavior (e.g., posing or walking). Using a treat (grain, grapes, bread) may help you train your bird. Typically, one or more folding tables that are 6 feet long are used for showmanship competition. If at all possible, train your bird on a similar surface. Cover the table with a carpet remnant of the appropriate size, because birds cannot walk well on slick or slippery surfaces.

Obtain a judging stick to use to pose and guide your bird when walking on the table. The best stick is sold as a metal telescoping pointer and can be purchased in stationery stores. Since it telescopes, it can be adjusted to several lengths, depending upon the size of the bird you are using. Whenever possible, use the stick, not your hands, to adjust the bird's position. It is inappropriate for a showman to use a wooden stick, such as a broom handle, to walk a bantam.

To train your bird:

- Keep its head up by lifting the beak lightly with the stick.
- Tuck up its wings with the stick each time the bird lets its wings droop.
- Most breeds of chickens should pose with their tails spread. Encourage the bird to spread its tail feathers by stroking the base of the tail under the main tail feathers. For breeds with gamy or tightly folded tails (e.g., Modern Games and Cornish), close your hand loosely over the tail and stroke lightly to the rear to encourage the bird to tighten its tail feathers.

- If the feathers become ruffled, straighten them with the stick.

Go through the steps of showmanship slowly and calmly with your bird. If you move too fast, you will startle the bird and it will not perform well. Once your bird is performing well, you may wish to practice showmanship with some of the distractions that can occur at a real competition. Ask some of your friends or family to be present when you practice. They should move about so the bird gets accustomed to the comings and goings of spectators. You can also play a radio while practicing so the bird gets used to walking and posing in a noisy environment.

## FITTING YOUR BIRD FOR COMPETITION

*Fitting* refers to the steps you take to prepare your bird for the show. Some fitting steps are closely tied to the day-to-day management of your birds. For example, when fitting the bird, prepare it so that it shows its true and best characteristics. If you are raising all-white or parti-white varieties, house them indoors and out of the sun. The sun's rays turn the white feathers a light yellow color that cannot be removed no matter what you do in the fitting process. To find out the specific points to give extra attention to when fitting your breed, it is always good to seek the help of others who have raised the same breed for several years.

Washing your bird will improve its appearance, and it is always a must with white or parti-white varieties. Mark your calendar with the dates of the shows you plan to attend. Then count backwards and plan to wash your birds at least 3 days before the show.

### Washing Your Bird

Materials needed:

- 3 washtubs
- Thermometer for measuring water temperature
- Sponge







*Figure 2. Proper attire. A: Showman in uniform carrying the chicken the proper way. B: Showman in street clothes carrying a turkey the proper way.*

must always be clean, professional, and appropriate for working around animals. Shirt tails should be tucked in, open-toed shoes are not allowed, a belt must always be worn with pants having belt loops, and shoe laces must always be tied. Poultry showmen should be aware that if they move into a round robin competition where rabbits are shown, a long-sleeved shirt or blouse is mandatory.

**Carrying a Bird.** A chicken's breast should be supported on the same hand that was used to remove the bird from its cage. The head and neck of the bird may be tucked between the arm and body of the showman (which is useful if the bird starts to struggle) or against the

showman's body and above the arm on which it is carried. The showman's other hand should always be kept on top of the bird's back (fig. 2A). This second hand will already be in position should the bird become excited and try to flap its wings.

To carry a turkey, it should first be positioned parallel to the showman. The showman should then firmly grasp the near leg and far wing of the bird (fig. 2B). The wing should be grasped at the point where it attaches to the body of the bird. Then the turkey is lifted straight up and off the ground. By carrying the turkey in this manner, the showman cannot be scratched by the near leg of the bird or hurt by its far wing. The far leg of the turkey cannot





Figure 3. Showmen holding their birds the proper way.

touch the showman and the near wing is held closed by the showman's body.

**Holding a Bird.** Birds should be held to give the judge a profile, or side view, of the body. The bird should be supported on the palm of the showman's hand. The bird should be alert with its head raised, its tail fluffed, and its wings tucked in the normal position (fig. 3).

**Evaluating a Bird.** Showmen will be asked to demonstrate in order the procedures used in examining a bird. When instructed by the judge to start, they will silently examine their own birds. As each step is completed, the showman should glance up and look at the judge. The judge may acknowledge, with a nod of the head, that the showman has completed that step. In classes with large numbers of showmen, it may not be possible for the judge to acknowledge every step for each showman. For certain steps that require estimating a measurement (depth of abdomen, distance between pubic

bones, etc.), the showman may hold up a certain number of fingers or spread of fingers to indicate to the judge the size of the area measured. Throughout the examination, the showman should be evaluating the bird mentally against the standard (or perfect specimen for the particular breed and variety). In addition, it is during this portion that any abnormalities that could suggest a problem with bird health or management should be noted.

**1. Head.** Raise the bird to shoulder height. Turn the bird so that the head and face can be examined. The hand supporting the bird should remain in place while the free hand moves the bird's head (fig. 4). Complete the head examination by turning the bird to examine the other side of the head and face.

**2. Wings.** To examine the condition and pattern of the wing feathers, fan out the wing that is closer to your free hand. This is easily done by pulling the wing away from the bird's body (fig. 5). To examine the second wing, place your free hand across the bird's body and



*Figure 4. Showman evaluating a bird's head.*



*Figure 5. Showman evaluating the wing closer to the free hand.*