

Living a cowgirl's dream at 17

by Lisa Hinton-Valdrighi

Taylor Mitchell's long blond hair was knotted high on her head in a messy bun. She wiped sweat from her brow; her face was sun kissed red from working outside midday in the summer. She tugged on a 1,000-pound heifer, pulling it across the pasture for a brush and grooming. Exhibit day approaches.

Taylor looks the part of a stereotypical cowgirl. No make-up, T-shirt well worn and rolled up tight on the shoulders. She's thin and muscular from hauling hay and leading cattle.

For someone so young, she's a veteran in her field of exhibiting livestock, with seven years experience and a room full of awards to show for it, including more than 220 ribbons, along with 20 champion banners and a few extra large, gold belt buckles that weigh more than she does.

Farming and raising livestock is in her blood. She grew up on her grandfather Joe Newsome's farm in Heathsville. She was 10 years old when she started showing sheep at livestock exhibitions. Two years later, "I halter-broke two calves and on my way I went," she said.

Since then it's become an obsession.

"I eat, sleep and dream cattle," said the 17-year-old Northumberland High School senior. She smiles wide and talks with excitement—and a wealth of knowledge—about her pastime. Actually, pastime seems too trite. It's so much more than a hobby for Taylor. It's daily work that calls for discipline and dedication. It's a lifestyle she embraces, seems to love.

Everybody has a Story

"My dream is to wash and blow dry cattle all day," she said with a hint of a Southern accent.

August is a crazy month for Taylor and the livestock circuit. Last week she was readying her three heifers, steer and three lambs for the Fredericksburg Fair. Her mother, Michelle Newsome, and Taylor were packing up two trailers with her livestock and her brother Carter's goats for four show days. Now that she's a new driver, Taylor would be making the daily trips to and from Fredericksburg to take care of the animals during the 10-day fair. The animals will stay at the fairgrounds but the livestock show days are only on Saturdays and Sundays. On off days, Taylor will have to be there to feed, water and clean up after them, said Michelle.

Taylor and her crew will be back home for a few days before the Richmond County open show August 14, then will head off to the Rockingham County Fair in Harrisonburg.

"August is my crazy month but I love it," she said.

She'll also show at the State Fair of Virginia, which begins in late September.

Michelle has packing the family's 20-foot trailer down to a science. Partitions help separate the animals. They usually take all the goats, lambs and cattle, along with feed, gear and their own provisions in one trailer.

"We look like a clown car on the Beverly Hillbillies. When we start unloading, we just keep pulling them out," said Michelle.



Taylor Mitchell bathes and grooms her heifers before showing them. Photo by Lisa Hinton-Valdrighi

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A day in the life of a show girl

Along with cattle at Newsome's Ramah Farm on Dodly Road, there are also goats, hogs, sheep and dogs. Taylor helps feed and care for all of them.

She was about 2 years old when a cow was having a difficult delivery and had prolapsed.

"Mom was pulling in the driveway and I said, 'Mom, there's a bubble on the moo butt!'"

She's still around during the calving process but now when the calf is born she sizes it up for showing. The farm has about 50 births in the fall and that's when Taylor picks out her show calves.

"I look for deep bodies and muscle, and with heifers, whether it's gonna be an easy keeper, like if I'm gonna have to feed 'em all winter or if they can feed on their own. With a steer, I look at how long and tall it is and is it gonna finish in 13 months or at two years old."

By finish, Taylor means how long before the animal reaches market weight.

The calves are weaned between 500-600 pounds. The Newsomes sell all but the four or five Taylor keeps for show. By the time they're taken to an exhibition, the heifers and steers weigh around 1,300 pounds which makes for an awesome beast for tiny Taylor to handle.

"I've been humped on in a show ring. It's not pretty," she said.

She explains that, at a competition, if you're showing cattle the required attire is closed-toed shoes, usually boots—hers are leather, green and pink—long-sleeved, button-down shirts and jeans. But don't make those jeans too long she said, because if a cow steps on your cuff "you'll go right down with her."

Michelle has had broken ribs from a cow's accidental headbutt and Taylor has broken her foot and suffered a rope burn that became infected. She spent a week in the hospital and pointed out the scar that remains on her hand two years later.

"She got spooked and took off. Wrapped me around a stake in the tent. But I didn't let go. I held on," she said. "I'm 100 pounds against a 1,000-pound cow. It's a fight sometimes but I don't give up."

A little danger doesn't deter her. She's spirited and spunky.

After Taylor picks her show calves, she works with them daily to halter break them. She walks them down the lane to the mailbox twice a day. To prepare for a show she washes them, blow dries them, clips them and gives them haircuts. While at the show, she has to keep them cool with generator-powered fans and keep the bugs off them with fly spray. There's plenty of work involved.



Taylor Mitchell and her grandfather, Joe Newsome, display all the ribbons and awards won by Blizzard, one of her most decorated steers.

"These are not backyard pets. I hate it when I hear people say they want cows as pets. They're not," she said. "I ask them do they know the feed bill, how much grass they're gonna eat, how much room they're gonna need?"

She said a steer eats a five-gallon bucket of feed a day plus grass and still gets a round bale of hay.

Taylor takes care of the afternoon feeding on the farm "and that's a huge help cause when I get home, it's finished," said Michelle.

She grinds feed, bales hay and feeds the cattle and the pigs.

"I don't sit on my tail—I'm out there doing something," said Taylor.

The show

Taylor shows Black Angus cattle and both Texel and Hampshire Suffolk Cross sheep at exhibitions, which begin in May and usually end the first of October. In a normal year, she attends six or seven shows.

One of the lambs halter-broken by Taylor was Ram Lamb Dan, who went on to win reserve champion at a national Texel stud ram show in Sedalia, Missouri.

Blizzard was one of her most decorated steers.

In 2018, one of her calves won third place at the State Fair of Virginia and "that was a huge compliment," she said.

At many exhibitions, farm-raised calves compete against club calves "which are genetically designed to show," said Michelle.

Club calves are raised in a walk-in cooler or air conditioned barn so their hair grows long.

At an exhibition, calves are judged primarily in three categories: showmanship, market or commercial. Showmanship is how good they walk with a handler. Market judging is based on "whether [the animal] is ready for the scale and slaughter. You know, freezer ready," said Taylor. Commer-



Taylor Mitchell leads her lambs out of their pen. Photo by Lisa Hinton-Valdrighi

cial cows are ones that return to the farm for breeding.

There are youth divisions for 9-11 year olds, or novice; 12-13 year olds, or junior; 13-15 year olds, or intermediate; and 16-19 year olds, or senior. Open competition is for all ages.

Taylor's 13-year-old brother, Carter, shows goats.

"He doesn't even put in the work," said Taylor. "But then he can go in the ring and beat my tail. Makes me so mad."

Although Taylor bonds with the cattle and lambs, she's made peace with the end result.

"The first year, my mom reminded me you're gonna slaughter that lamb. I cried and cried. But now it's like, that's life. It's hard but I've gotten used to it. It's like bye," she said. "Not slaughtering them—I look at that as you're wasting money."

She knows at the end of this

show season, "they're gonna go in the freezer when I'm done with the state fair," she said. "Now, when I eat a steak, every bite I eat I say, 'I miss you!'"

4-H livestock club

Taylor is one of about 10 youth in the Essex County 4-H livestock club. Sponsored by Virginia Cooperative Extension, the 4-H in Essex includes students from Essex, Westmoreland, Mathews, Richmond and Northumberland counties. They meet once a month and the livestock club will show at the State Fair of Virginia, October 1-3, at The Meadow Event Park in Doswell.

"I try to get as many people involved as I can," said Taylor.

"All you need is a dog pen, get a goat, a leash from Tractor Supply and there you go, you got a show goat. Just get off the sofa, stop playing video games and do something," she said.