

BANNERS & Bling

By Libby Williams

It takes an exceptional gilt and an expert showman to reach the top ranks each summer in Louisville at the National Junior Summer Spectacular (NJSS). But for Chloe O'Neal of Wilkinson, Ind., winning the NJSS has unexpectedly become the standard— she has done it twice. It may be Chloe's lucky show shirt, or it could be just plain hard work and dedication. Either way, the O'Neals have been privileged to win one of the most elite gilt shows in the country, back-to-back.



Back-to-back championships at the National Junior Summer Spectacular won the O'Neal family two one-year trailer leases from Cimarron Trailers, two clocks, and two Grand Champion Gilt Overall banners. The family, (l to r) mom Clarissa, Jayden, Chloe, Makenzie, and dad Chris, currently display their awards in the house, but will soon move them to the office of their show barn.

Only 8 years old and almost a third-grader at Eastern Hancock School in Indiana, Chloe has yet to even enter and show in 4-H. She's been driving hogs in the National Junior Swine Association (NJSA) and the Indiana Junior Swine Circuit (IJSC) since she was 4 years old. Her first gilt, a crossbred called Lipgloss, was by her side as she took her first steps in a show ring. However, it wasn't pigs that originally sparked the family's interest, it was sheep.

The right fit

Chris O'Neal, Chloe's father, grew up raising and showing lambs. Naturally, Chris wanted his kids to be involved in something he'd been passionate about growing up. Unfortunately, Chloe's first experience with a sheep would also be her last.

"I bought her a lamb and it knocked her down in the yard, and that was it," Chris says. "She wasn't showing sheep – so we switched and bought two pigs and that's how we started."

Chloe doesn't regret trading the lamb for pigs. Especially not after four short

“We’re not in it to make money. It’s worth every penny. This is how we get our family together.”

– Chris O’Neal



Chloe (r) and Makenzie “play showpig” with their younger brother, Jayden. One of their favorite things to do, the kids pretend to wash pig in the washracks of their show barn.

years of showing has paid off so well.

“It stepped on my toe ... and I never touched another sheep again,” Chloe says.

That same year, after the family had decided that showing pigs, not sheep, would be their forté, the O’Neals traveled to the North American International Livestock Exposition (NAILE) in Louisville, Ky., to watch the show. That is where they met Travis Platt of Roanoke, Ind.

“Travis is the first guy we started with,” Chris says. “He’s been with us since day one.”

Platt owns Platt Showpigs and *ThePigPlanet.com*. When he’s not selling his own show stock, he’s busy traveling the country in search of showpigs for families that he works with. The O’Neals quickly became one of these families after meeting Platt.

“They are one of those families

that are my top ones,” Platt says. “They work at it, they don’t need babysitting, and they have common knowledge of livestock. It’s awesome.”

Platt helps the O’Neal family purchase roughly 90 percent of the pigs they show, including the back-to-back champion gilts. He’s given them advice on feeding, raising and showing hogs, and Chloe and her younger sister, Makenzie, 5, love him.

“We have a good time,” Platt says. “They’re good kids.”

Since meeting Platt in 2008, the O’Neal family has driven more than 30 champion hogs, two of which took Grand Champion Overall honors at the 2010 and

2011 NJSS shows. But for the O’Neals, showing pigs isn’t just about winning. It’s about family and building character.

Family first

Chloe’s mom, Clarissa, wasn’t involved showing as a kid like Chris was. In fact, Clarissa had little to no background in the livestock industry. But when Chris decided to get their kids involved showing, Clarissa jumped on the bandwagon.

“It didn’t take long to get Clarissa. She didn’t know anything about it, but after a couple of shows, she was hooked,” Chris says. “She got the ‘show fever.’”

Chloe began showing at the age of 4, and little sister and look-alike, Makenzie, began showing two years later, when she was 3 years old. Now Chloe and Makenzie have a younger brother, Jayden, 1, who will be entering the show circuit in the fall of 2012 at the NAILE. The kids are the eighth generation on the family

farm, and live close to their grandparents, Roger and JoAnn O’Neal, who accompany them on nearly every show trip.

Although Chris and Clarissa admit that having their kids show is an expensive hobby, they focus on the family value.

“We’re not in it to make money,” Chris says. “It’s worth every penny. This is how we get our family together.”

“It’s just the memories we have every weekend,” Clarissa says. “Whether it is playing baseball or football or whatever, it’s always about the family time.”

Working to win

Showing pigs didn’t necessarily come naturally to Chloe. So, the family became really involved because she required tips and hints from others, especially her parents. But the first time Chloe drove a pig made a big impact on her.

“We went down to the North American once, and I knew some people showing there,” Chloe says. “I started showing (their pig), and then my dad and my mom started helping me.”

Makenzie started watching Chloe at a young age, and found a unique way to practice showing without a pig.

“I got older and Makenzie wanted to start showing,” Chloe says. “She’d take balls and whips and show with them.”

Directing basketballs and volleyballs with a pipe doesn’t seem like it would create a young showman, but that is exactly what it did for Makenzie. “Playing showpig” prepared Makenzie for the day she’d make her show ring debut with a real showpig instead of a volleyball.

Today, Jayden plays showpig just as his sister did when she was a toddler.

The girls’ stellar showmanship skills don’t just stem from rolling balls. Instead, nearly every day, Chloe and Makenzie have a showmanship competition in the yard, with mom and dad acting as judges. Showmanship makes Chloe nervous, so it is something she says she

Feature Article

practices very hard. Makenzie doesn't get as nervous, but the girls' competitiveness keeps them working hard all the time.

"I'd pretend the tree was the judge," Chloe says, on practicing showmanship. "I'm really nervous in showmanship, so then I pretend the judge is a tree."

Because the family grew up playing showpig, working the hogs on a daily basis isn't something that they dread; they truly enjoy it. Chris and Clarissa say they give the girls breaks from time to time, and they'll take on some of the work themselves. Plus, there are those days when, according to Makenzie, "it's raining or it's really dark," and the girls get out of working pigs.

According to Platt, showing pigs isn't something that Chris and Clarissa push upon their kids. The girls simply love showing, and that is what he says makes the family fun to work with.

"It's phenomenal how much they work, and it's a whole family deal: grandparents, Chris and Clarissa, and both girls," Platt says. "It's not a parent project, you know, parents living through their kids. Those kids eat it up and they really like it."

The quirks

For these two girls, showing isn't always at the center of their lives. Chloe and Makenzie spend much of their time at shows playing with friends and meeting new people. The girls have several friends who live in Illinois that they only get to see at shows.

When Chloe is not showing pigs across the country, she is reading or working on math. Her favorite book is "The Popularity Papers," and she loves to swim.

Makenzie will be a

kindergartener in the fall, and she likes going to school. She's also a fan of playing outside, swinging and swimming.

Chloe and Makenzie's family recognize their love for water and always make it a priority to stay at hotels with swimming pools while they are on road trips, so the girls can relax between shows. In the summer when the family isn't busy showing, the O'Neals spend time at the lake, boating and playing on the beach.

"It can't be all work and no play," Clarissa says. "Especially at their age, or they are going to get burnt out."

Style is another fascination of the O'Neal girls, and many people identify them for their show ring look. They are recognized for wearing 'bling' belts, fancy shirts and flashy jewelry – and it's not mom's doing. Looking good is one of Chloe and Makenzie's trademarks. Each girl has her own show ring facade. Chloe's lucky show shirt has granted her success three times. Makenzie doesn't have a lucky outfit, just a favorite zebra shirt to wear when driving pigs. In or out of the ring, the O'Neal girls are eye-catchers.

It's a learning experience

Chris and Clarissa value each experience their girls have from their involvement in the NJSA and showing pigs. They say the youth organization teaches their kids much more than just how to prepare and show a hog.

"It teaches them hard work and responsibility ... instead of just sitting in the house playing video games, they learn work ethic," Chris says.

Learning to be humble in success and gracious in loss are also important principles to the O'Neals.

"It is good for them to learn that not everything comes easy," Clarissa says.

Chris agrees.

"Life is not just 'everyone's a winner,' you know. You've got to take the good with the bad," Chris says. "Some days are good and some days aren't. It's a good lesson that they learn young."

Just the fact that Chloe and Makenzie are learning these lessons and becoming the best showmen they can be puts them ahead of the game in the show ring and in life. The girls haven't even entered the 4-H show circuit yet, but promise to be competitive in the future.

"People are already saying, 'Wow, what are they going to be like when they're in 4-H,'" Platt says. "They are going to be very competitive at all levels, and I think those girls will show until they are 21. They just kind of have that drive."

Winning the NJSS last year gave Chloe the drive and passion to keep succeeding and being competitive. After all, 2010 was the O'Neal's first year showing at the NJSS. Acquaintances suggested they not return because they might not do as well a



Used as the cover of *Seedstock EDGE* in the 2011 March Showpig Issue (above), Chloe and Makenzie parade last year's Grand Champion Gilt Overall, Superstar, before the STC's Yorkshire show. This year (left) the girls, nearly a mirror image of last year, parade Juliette, the Duroc, before the 2011 STC Duroc Show.

Makenzie

Age: 5

Year in School: Kindergarten

NJSA member for: 2 years

Favorite Breed: Landrace

Favorite part of showing: Playing with friends at the shows

Favorite things to do when not showing: Going to school, playing outside and swimming



Chloe

Age: 8

Year in School: 3rd Grade

NJSA member for: 4 years

Favorite Breed: Yorkshire and Crossbred

Favorite part of showing: Making new friends and having fun

Favorite things to do when not showing: Reading, math and swimming

second time. But they brought a Duroc gilt called Juliette that took the show, and came out with back-to-back wins. Chloe had another gilt in the Champion drive, the Reserve Champion Hampshire female, which Makenzie helped show. Makenzie was also successful at the NJSS, winning Reserve Champion Bred-and-Owned Landrace Gilt.

In the future, Chris hopes to have all three of his kids in the coliseum

at the Indiana State Fair, where the champion drive of the swine show takes place. Until then, the O'Neals are getting ready to enter Chloe in 4-H, so she can show hogs in a different arena. Makenzie will keep bringing hogs to the NJSA and IJSC shows, and Jayden will continue to play showpig until he begins to participate in the NJSA.

Right now, Chloe may not even know how well she has done by hav-

ing repeat championships at the NJSS. Chris hopes that in the future he can help her see the impact of what she's done in the showpig world.

"She is still pretty young to know the impact (of winning back-to-back)," Chris says. "One day Chloe will actually know how well she's really done."

