



# 4-H POULTRY SHOW- MANSHIP

**NATIONAL  
STANDARD**

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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



- Towels
- Mild soap flakes
- Soft toothbrush
- Hair dryer
- Toothpicks
- Nail clippers

Place the three washtubs on a bench or other surface that will be at a convenient height for you. Fill the first tub with water whose temperature is 95°F (35°C). Put in enough soap flakes to make a good lather. Do not use a detergent, as it will make the feathers brittle.

Support the bird in the palm of your hand and use your thumb and fourth finger to hold the wing tips to the body. Immerse the bird in the soapy water, taking care not to put the bird's head under water. Use the sponge to lather the feathers by rubbing in the direction the feathers grow.

Use the toothbrush to clean the shanks and feet. If the bird has especially dirty or muddy feet and shanks, you may wish to wash them off with warm water before placing the bird in the first tub. This will keep the soapy water from getting too muddy.

Once the bird is clean, transfer it to the second tub, which should be filled with clean water at 85°F (29.5°C). Hold the bird as before and let it soak for 2 minutes. Next, draw the bird through the water against the grain of the feathers. If you draw the bird through the water three or four times, most of the soap will rinse out of the feathers. Placing one teaspoon of white vinegar in the tub of water will help to get the soap out.

Have the third tub filled with clean water at 75°F (23.9°C). Give the bird a final rinse in the third tub. Support the bird as before and draw the bird through the water as you did in the second tub.

Dry the bird using clean, absorbent towels, such as old beach or bath towels. Wrap a clean towel around the bird with just its shanks and feet sticking out. This will allow you to easily control the bird while you clean its shanks and feet. If the bird still has dirt under its toenails, remove it with a toothpick. Carefully trim over-

grown nails a little at a time with nail clippers. Uncover the bird's head and use a clean, wet sponge to wash the bird's comb and wattles.

Remove the bird from the towel and use a hair dryer to blow dry the bird. Use a low setting and dry the feathers in the direction they grow. Coop each bird separately in a clean cage with plenty of dry, clean litter (woodshavings or straw) for the bird to stand on. The cages should be kept in a warm, draft-free area.

All the above practices are just part of showing the bird in its best light. Showmen should be aware that practices commonly called "faking"—any action that attempts to remove or cover up a serious defect or disqualification on the bird, such as using dye or paint to conceal an incorrect feather color—are unethical. It is also unethical for showmen to falsify records in any way, such as lying about ownership of the showmanship bird. And, of course, it is equally unethical to use any product not labeled for poultry to affect the condition or behavior of the bird (such as giving a bird some type of human medicine to make it more docile or calm during the competition).

## THE COMPETITION

### Judging Divisions

Contestants are divided into classes based on their experience in poultry showmanship and their age, or a combination of these factors. Show organizers should remember that in creating the classes their goal should be to create classes where participants compete against others of comparable skill.

It is the responsibility of the showman or parent or both to inform the show organizers if the showman has any special needs (i.e., hearing or physical disability, etc.). The show organizers can discreetly inform the judge before the competition starts and allowances can be made.

### Awards

The awards are given based on the judging system chosen by the show organizers. This



may be the American system (awards from 1st place through 6th or lower) or the Danish system (any number of exhibitors may receive blue, red, or white awards). The type of award system to be used is normally left up to the show organizers.

### **The Showmanship Competition Area**

A well-lit and well-ventilated indoor area is best for showmanship and usually will provide the most comfortable environment for contestants, judges, and spectators. If the competition must be held outdoors in warm weather, a shady spot must be used to avoid overheating both the birds and the exhibitors. An arena or theater-style room will provide the best vantage points for spectators. The bird posing and walking area should be large enough to accommodate 10 showmen. If more than 10 are entered in any one class, the class must be broken into flights. Tables should be covered with carpeting (remnants work fine) to give the birds a good surface for walking. At least one large show cage is needed. If possible, a public ad-

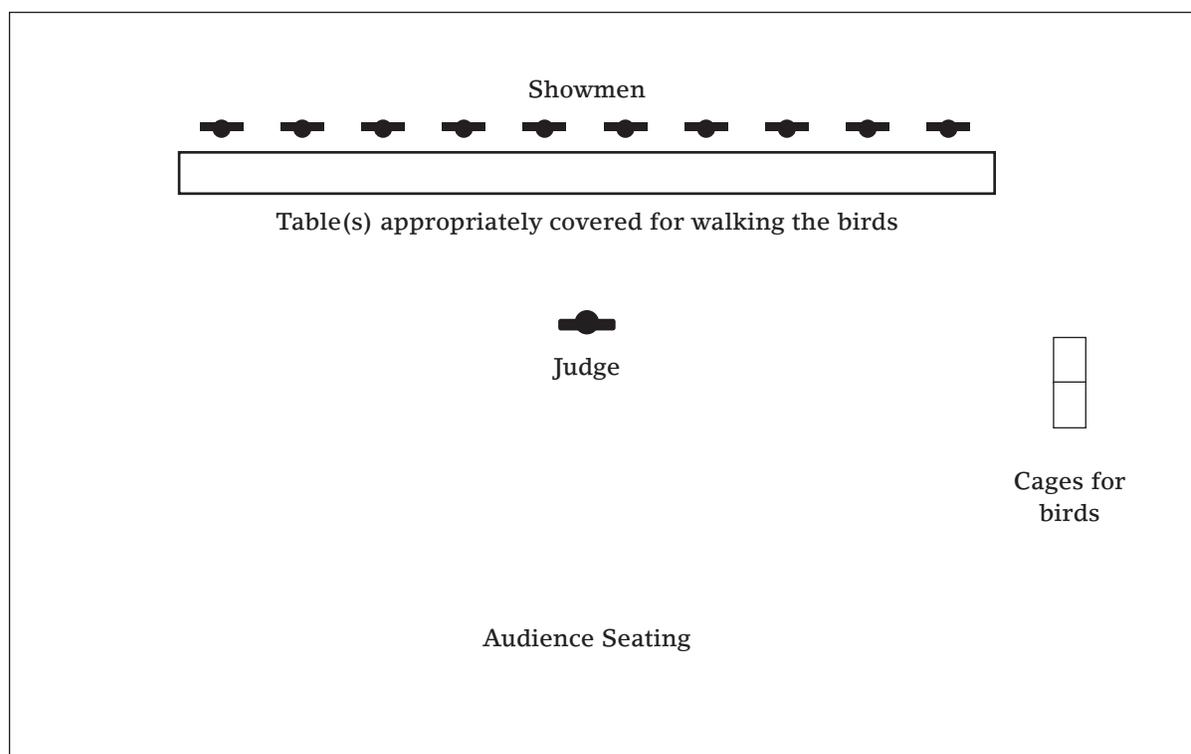
dress system will enhance the crowd's enjoyment of the competition. Have competitors line up on the side of the table(s) so that the audience is looking at the competitors' faces (and at the back of the judge—see fig. 1). At the discretion of show management, contestants may be judged one at a time instead of in a group.

## **Procedures**

### **Stage I**

Participants should leave their birds in the show cages until their class is called. At that time they should report to the judge, who will ask their name and assign them positions behind the showmanship table. The judge will first ask the showmen to hold their birds off the table in the proper manner and then examine their birds.

***Personal Appearance of Member.*** In general, attire may take one of two forms: uniforms if required by the fair or exposition (fig. 2A) or street clothes (fig. 2B). The clothing



*Figure 1.* Suggested arrangement for the competition.



**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.

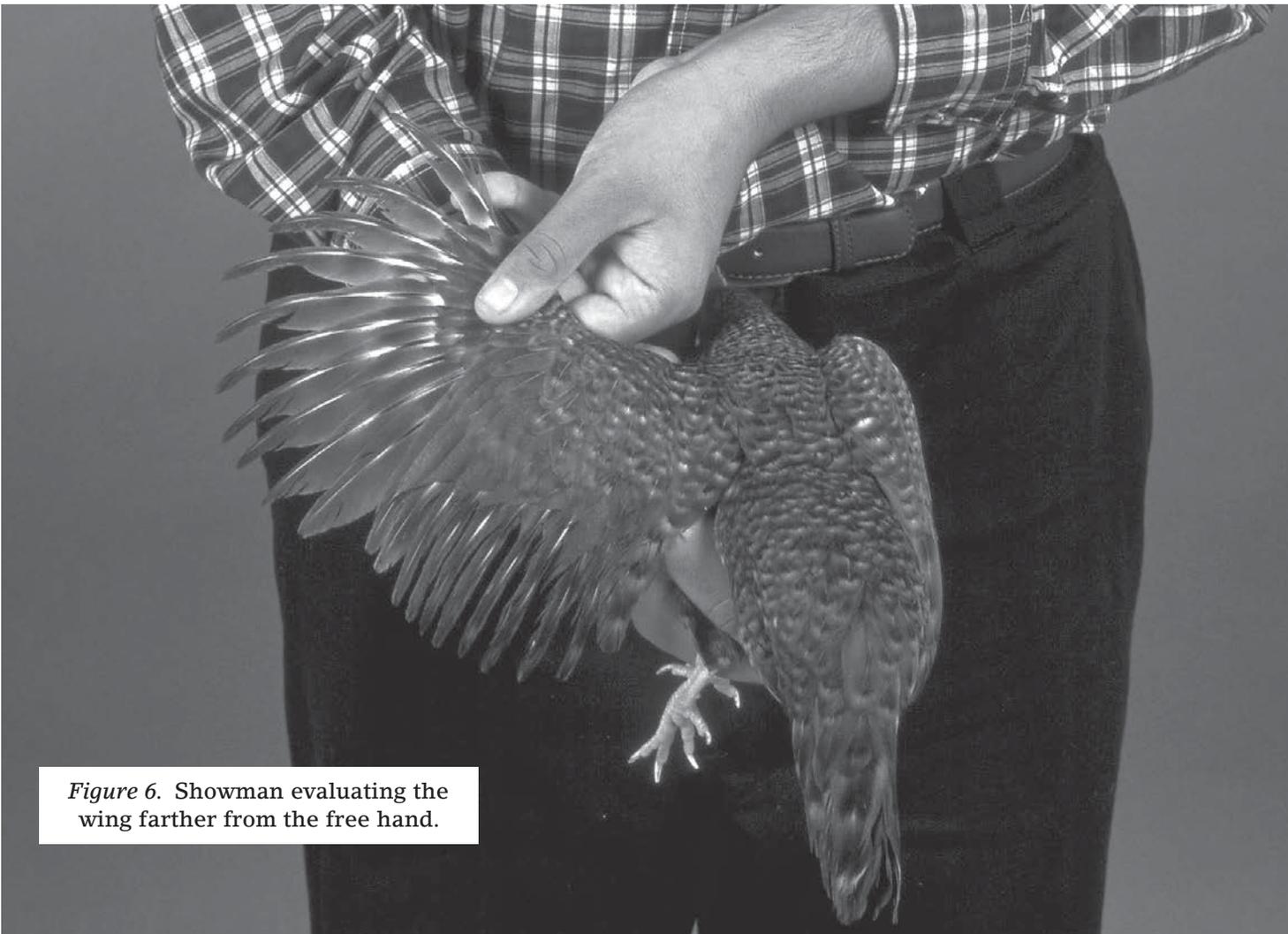
**2. Wings.** To examine the condition and pattern of the wing feathers, fan out the wing that is closer to your free hand. This is easily done by pulling the wing away from the bird's body (fig. 5). To examine the second wing, place your free hand across the bird's body and



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



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



*Figure 6.* Showman evaluating the wing farther from the free hand.



*Figure 7.* Examination of undercolor.

apply pressure to the last wing joint with the thumb and fingers of the free hand (fig. 6).

**3. Undercolor.** The lower part of the bird's feathers, or the undercolor, is not visible when the feathers are held naturally against the bird's body. Examine the undercolor of the back and body of the bird by gently pulling the tops of the feathers in the direction opposite to which the feathers grow (fig. 7).

**4. Width of body.** Determine the width of body by placing the thumb and index finger of the free hand across the bird's body directly behind the base of the wings. To determine the width and shape of the body, gently move the measuring arch formed by the thumb and index finger downward to the tail (fig. 8).

**5. Breast.** While maintaining a secure grip on the bird's legs, change the position of the

bird so that the head is downward, its back is against the showman's body, and the breast is facing the judge. The free hand should be used to measure the keel (fig. 9) and examine it for straightness, knots, indentations, or other defects. While the bird is in this position, the depth of body, or the distance between the keel and back, may also be determined.

**6. Vent.** Hold the bird in the normal carrying position and tilt it forward so the vent can be seen. With the thumb and fingers of the free hand, expose the vent and note its color, moistness, and pliability (fig. 10). Because of the warm and moist nature of this area, this is the region most likely to harbor lice and mites if the bird is infested. Carefully examine the vent for evidence of external parasites (the parasites' white egg sacks around the base of the feath-



Figure 8. Estimating width of body.



Figure 9. Examination of keel (or breastbone) length.





*Figure 10.* Examination of vent.



*Figure 11.* Determination of depth of abdomen.

ers, straw-colored adult lice, black or red colored mites).

**7. Depth of abdomen.** After examining the vent, measure the depth of abdomen by placing as many fingers of the free hand as possible between the tip of the keel and the pubic bones (fig. 11).

**8. Width between pubic bones.** The width between pubic bones is determined by placing as many fingers of the free hand as possible between the tips of these bones (fig. 12). It should be noted that while the depth of abdomen and width between pubic bones are measured on every bird during showmanship, the true importance of these measurements is in the female bird. Both a deep abdomen and wide distance between the pubic bones are signs of a good egg layer.

**9. Feet and legs.** To examine the feet and



*Figure 12.* Measurement of width between pubic bones.



Figure 13. Examination of feet and legs.



Figure 14. Examination of the fronts of feet and legs.

legs, the bird is held against the showman's body. The free hand should be used to examine all the parts of both legs and feet. Rotate the bird in your hand so that the front of the legs and feet can be examined (figs. 13 and 14).

**Stage I Points**

Personal appearance of member	5
Carrying the bird	5
Examining the bird	15
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Stage I Total	25

**Stage II**

The judge will ask showmen to pose the birds on the table, to individually pass their birds to the judge for evaluation, and to place their birds in a designated cage and then take them out.

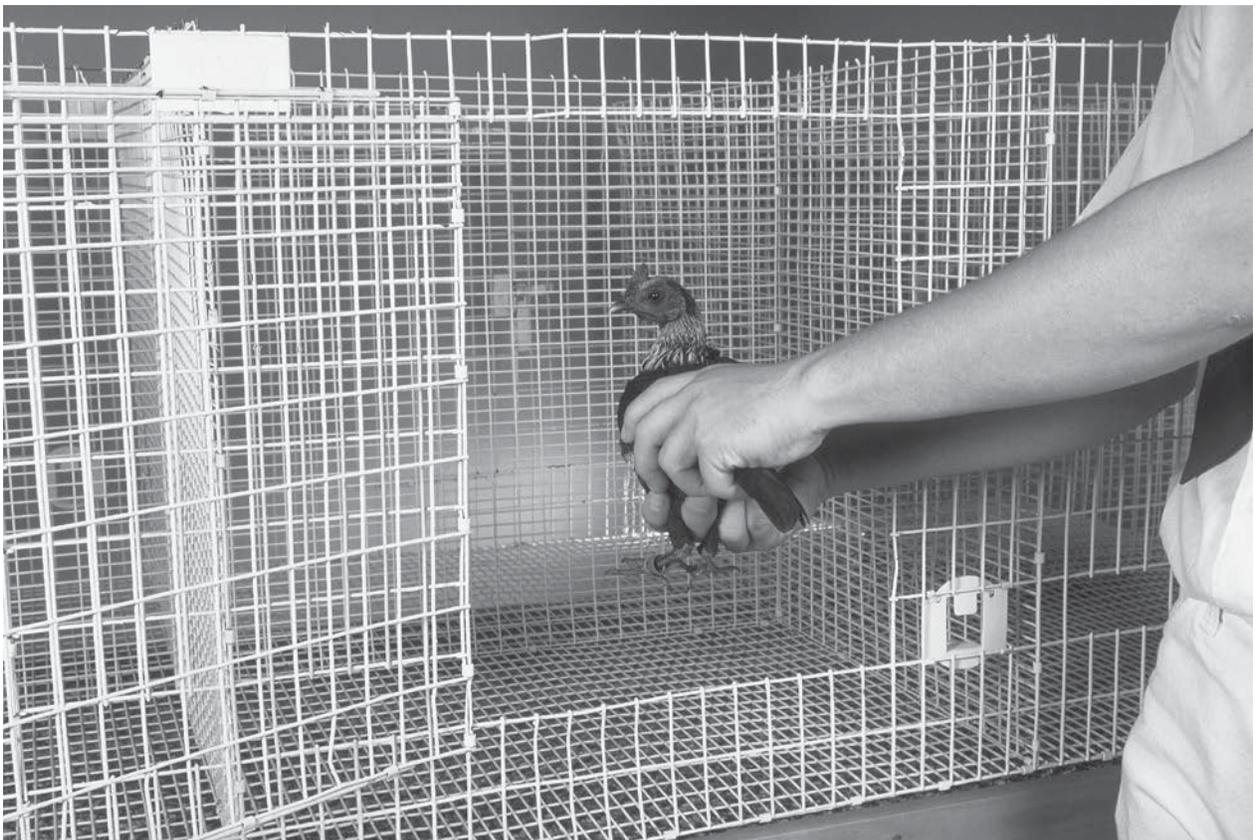
**Posing the Bird.** Place the bird on the table so the judge has a good view of the profile (the side) of the bird (fig. 15). The judge may specify in which direction the birds are to be posed. Attempt to pose the bird as appropriate to its breed. Never lose control of your bird.

**Cooping the Bird.** When instructed to coop your bird, carry the bird to the cage, open the cage door, turn the bird, and put it into the cage head first. Place the bird on the cage floor, smooth its feathers, and close the door (fig. 16). Look at the judge and wait until you are directed to remove the bird from the cage.

The bird is always placed in the cage and removed from the cage head first. The reason for this is that if the bird puts out its wings and it is moving in a head-first direction, the feathers



*Figure 15. Showmen posing their birds.*



*Figure 16. Cooping the bird.*

will not be damaged by the cage door. Problems occur when the bird is pulled out of the cage tail first. If the bird puts out its wings and the showman continues to pull, feathers can be broken. When working with bantams, who because of their size are easily transferred, make a point of obviously directing the bird's head in the direction you are moving it.

**Removing the Bird from the Cage.** To remove the bird from the cage, open the door and reach across the bird's back. Grasp the far wing and gently turn the bird so that it is facing the cage door (fig. 17A). Slide your second hand beneath the bird's body and place one or more fingers between the bird's legs. When the fingers are tightened, the bird can be lifted with its weight supported in the palm of the hand and the fingers controlling any leg movement. With the first hand on the bird's back, the bird can be removed from the cage head first and then the cage door closed (fig. 17B).

### Stage II Points

Posing the bird	10
Quality and condition of the bird	10
Handling the bird in and out of the cage	5
Stage II Total	25

### Stage III

The judge will ask all but one showman to pick up their birds and step back from the table. One at a time, the contestants will be called to the table for this stage. The judge will ask the showman to pose the bird and may indicate in which direction the bird is to be posed. The judge will then ask the showman to walk the bird. A judging stick should be used to guide the bird (fig. 18). Tethers are *not* allowed. The showman should carefully follow the instructions given. If asked to walk the bird to the end of the table, the showman should do so, pose the bird, and then look to the judge for further instructions. The bird should not be picked up until the judge excuses the showman.

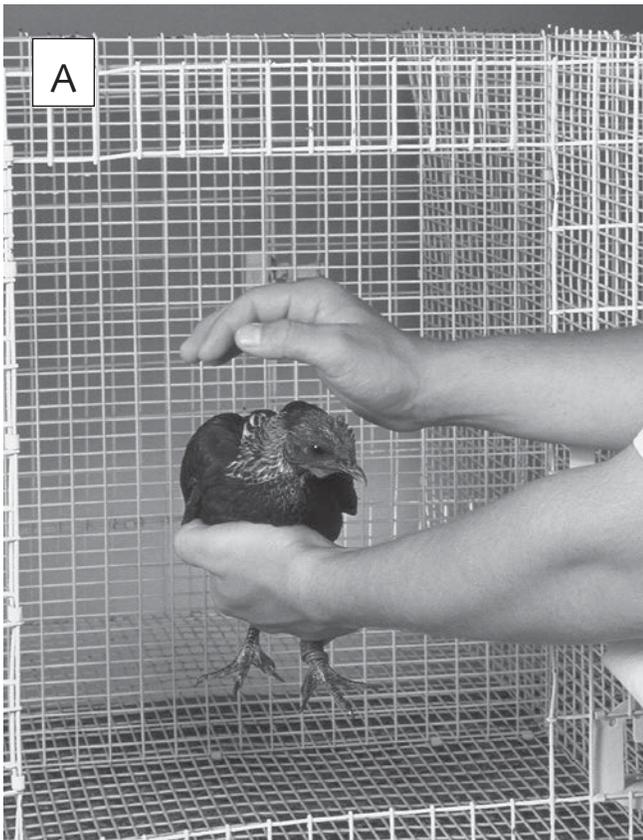


Figure 17. Removing the bird from the cage.



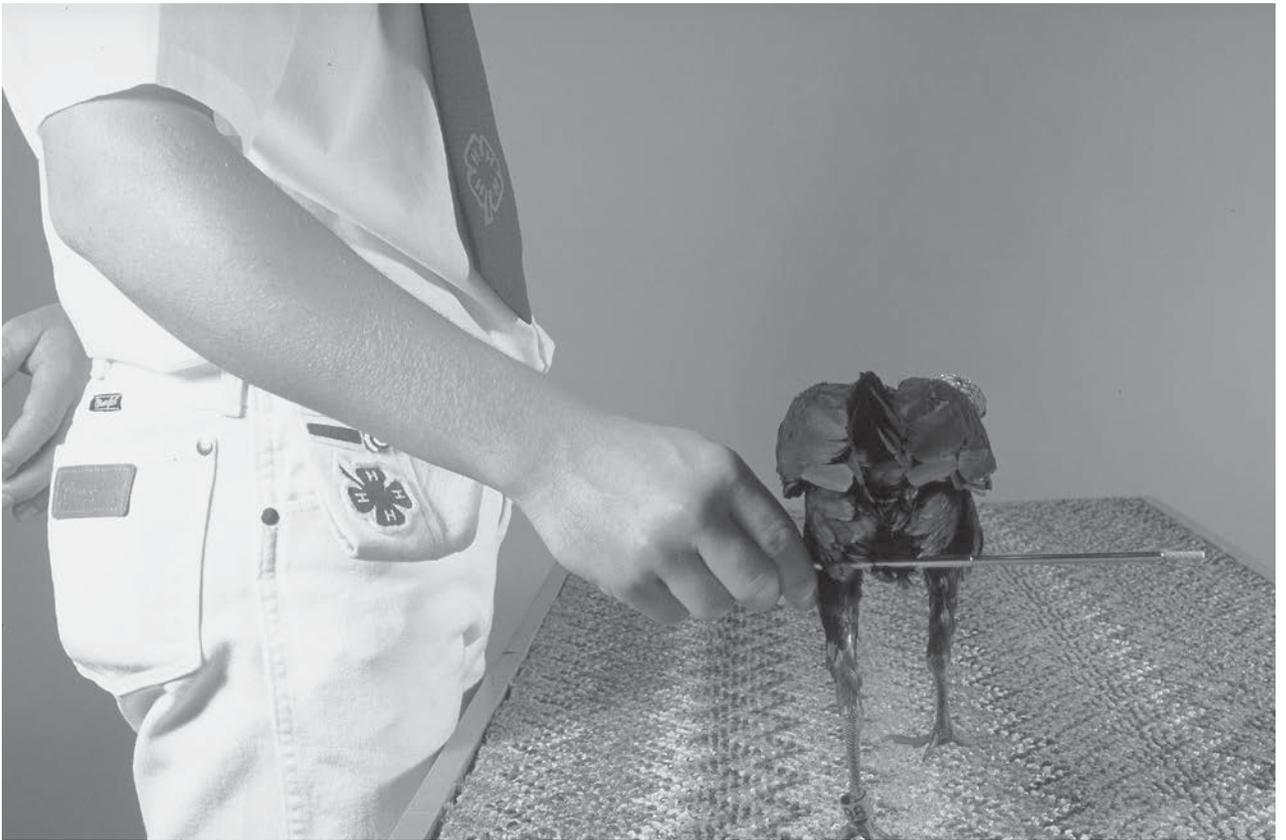


Figure 18. Guiding the bird with a judging stick.

### Stage III Points

Posing the bird	10
Walking the bird	15
Stage III Total	25

### Stage IV

With all the showmen lined up at the table, the judge will ask each showman questions. Showmen will be instructed to continue holding their birds or to place them back on the table. If a public address system is available, the judge will pass the microphone to the showman.

During this stage the judge will ask questions that test the showman's knowledge of standard bred birds and the care and production of the same. The level of difficulty will vary with the age and experience level of the showmen.

Showmen should listen carefully to the judge's questions and answer them in full sen-

tences using correct English. If the answer is not known, the showman may respond, "I am sorry that I do not know the answer." The showman may offer some related information to the judge.

### Stage IV Sample Questions (listed in order of increasing difficulty)

- Is your bird a male or female? How old is it? Given that it is a (male/female) and that it is \_\_\_ (months/years) old, what is it called?
- In the *American Standard of Perfection*, what class contains the breed you are showing?
- You have told me the breed of chicken you have, now what is its variety? Can you tell me another variety of the same breed?
- In what part of the world was your breed developed?
- Can you tell me an economic quality of the bird you are raising?

- What type of diet do you provide for your adult females? What is the protein level?
- Are there any particular problems associated with breeding the type of poultry you raise?

### Stage IV Points Total

Poise	5
Speaking ability	5
Knowledge	15
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Stage IV Total	25

### Ties

In the event of tied scores, the judge may choose to break the tie by asking the tied contestants to exchange birds. The judge may take the bird from the first contestant and ask the second contestant to pass his or her bird to the first contestant. The second contestant then rotates the bird so that it is supported on the palm of the hand and is facing the first contestant. The first contestant then slides one hand between the legs of the bird, places her or his second hand on the bird's back, and lifts it to the proper position for the bird being held. The judge may then ask the first contestant to evaluate the new bird he or she is holding. Another method of breaking a tie is for the judge to ask both contestants the same question and give the win to the first contestant to correctly answer the question.

## JUDGING

In poultry showmanship, the judge may eliminate contestants after each stage. This can be

especially useful with very large classes or if some contestants are obviously inadequately prepared to compete. At the judge's discretion, a competition can be turned into a training event if all members are in need of substantial guidance.

The judge has complete authority over the operation of the contest and the evaluation of the contestants. The judge can delegate part of this responsibility. Judges should always work closely with the show organizers and be aware of any details that may be specific to a particular show. A judge may alter the configuration of the stage or the number of stages to fit time and show constraints.

Experienced 4-H members can play a valuable role in helping new members learn showmanship skills. It may be appropriate at small events, such as pre-fair shows, for the experienced members to help judge a showmanship contest. An adult judge should oversee the judging and advise the member-judges as to how they can make the contest more of a learning experience for all involved by giving positive feedback and constructive critiques to participants, formulating of good questions, and so on.

A poultry showmanship judge's scoresheet can be found at the end of this manual. This scoresheet can be duplicated and provided to the judge(s) prior to the competition. The scoresheet allows for a maximum of 10 members to be judged at once. After the members are in position, the judge can enter their names from left to right in columns 1 to 10 of the scoresheet.

