

## Competition so fierce they all chicken out

### Passion for poultry



Fess Parker, 7, of Jefferson holds his chicken that he entered in the recent Northeast Georgia Poultry Fanciers Association All-Breed Show at Jackson County Comprehensive High School.

#### **Trevor Frey / Staff**

Poultry fanciers bide their time at the recent Northeast Georgia Poultry Fanciers Association show at Jackson County Comprehensive High School. The event attracted chicken aficionados from seven states.

#### **Trevor Frey / Staff**



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JEFFERSON - For many people, chicken comes in two varieties: original and extra crispy.

But that kind of talk can get a person tarred and feathered in some circles - where chickens are judged on qualities other than their tastiness and the pecking order is determined by plumage, posture and personality.

Whether they're into miniature bantams or standard-size birds, American classics or some fancy imported breed, nearly every weekend poultry fanciers across the country load up their best chickens, ducks and game fowl for the chance to compete for crowing rights.

Traditionally a farm-based hobby reserved for members of Future Farmers of America or 4-H, the rearing and grooming of show poultry is becoming more popular. One of the hobby's premiere journals, Backyard Poultry, goes to some 50,000 households across the country.

More and more people seem to be catching what breeders call "the fancy."

More than 200 people braved snow, icy roads and hours cooped up in the car with crowing roosters to attend the second-annual Northeast Georgia Poultry Fanciers Association All-Breed Show at Jackson County Comprehensive High School this month.

"These poultry people are pretty dedicated," said Tully Westmoreland, president of the poultry fanciers. "It's got to be really bad to keep them from getting to a show."

Set-up started before 8 a.m. on a recent Saturday at the school's barn. Table after table - covering 7,000 square feet of show space - was

#### **MULTIMEDIA**

##### **► GALLERY:**

Want to know how the all-breed show is judged?

covered with cages that held birds of all colors and textures, birds that range from less than a pound to 90 pounds. By 9 a.m., about 125 exhibitors had stocked the barn with more than 1,300 hens, roosters, geese, turkeys and ducks.

Watch an audio slideshow as the process is explained: [View audio slideshow](#)

There were Japanese Silkies - white fluff balls with only a beak to hint which end takes in feed and which end deposits eggs.

There were Old English game bantams - swamp chickens, short birds with long skinny legs and rusty red and brown feathers.

There were 50-pound Leghorn roosters - chickens the size of toddlers, sleek and black with bright red wattles and combs.

## MULTIMEDIA

▶ **VIDEO:** Chickens and their owners at the Poultry Fanciers Association All-Breed Show:

Exhibitors from seven states attended the all-breed show, including Forrest Beuford of Claremore, Okla., and his leggy Leghorn roosters.

Many exhibitors have been perfecting their flocks for years, breeding Leghorns with the perfect color combs, Araucanas with perfectly sized ear tufts or Dominiques with the perfect chocolatey-slate stripes.

Finding the perfect birds - ones that are personable, have a good shape and sport perfect coloring - can take a lifetime.

"You need a bird that's tame," said Ronnie Ledford, who has raised Old English Game bantams since he was a teenager. "It needs to be one that you can train who, when the judge comes by, will go up to the front of the cage and act like she wants to be picked."

Judges are certified by chicken showing's governing bodies, the American Poultry and American Bantam associations.

At a show, the judges first make a cursory round to check out all the birds; they return to the standouts and more closely examine the birds, taking each out of the cages to inspect tails, wings and wattles. Awards are given for the best bird in each variety and the best-looking bird overall.

In order to help their birds wow the judges during that first inspection and in subsequent rounds of judging, exhibitors straighten feathers, grease wattles and clean feet with baby wipes or WD-40.

"You've just got to straighten their feathers and pet them," says Shannon Daniels, 13, who traveled from Baxter, Tenn., with her family. "We rub them, rub them, rub them, and it makes them shiny.

"Pretty ... basically," she says showing off her bird.



LOADING PLAYER

Some birds compete over and over, even if they have no chance of winning.

Fritz Ludzig, of Pendleton, S.C., shows Araucanas - rumpless chickens that have ear tufts and lay blue eggs.

Very strict APA standards describe ideal rumplessness and ear-tuft shape for Araucanas, and Ludzig has several prize-winning birds that fit the profile.

But whenever he goes to shows, he also brings Sideburns, one of his oldest birds. With a misshapen crown, Sideburns isn't the ideal Araucana.

"He's a good bird," he said. "But that's a deformity."

He won't win any prizes, but Ludzig likes having him around.

The bond between fancier and bird can be pretty intense, but most people wouldn't describe the members of their flocks as pets.

"It's not like a dog," said longtime fancier Ledford. "It's on a different wavelength. It's a barnyard pet."

And barnyard pets are fun to have around, said Dylan Hill, 12, of Commerce.

Pee-wee, Dylan's prize brown-red modern game bantam, is trained to sit on his shoulder. The bird nuzzles him to get away from the noise and the cold at shows.

"I think they're adorable," said Shannon, Dylan's friend from the show circuit. "They're soft. They're cute and you can train them to do just about anything."

Dylan and Shannon both started collecting chickens with the help of their grandfathers. Although they live four or five hours apart, they meet up often enough at shows that they've become good friends.

The show poultry community is growing, but it's not so big that people can't keep track of one another.

After years competing against each other, fanciers start to form a pretty cohesive flock. They trade birds and tips on new feed and grooming techniques.

"It's pretty tight-knit," Ledford said. "A lot of us are friends and we share birds and equipment. But it's all about the competition inside the showroom. It's dog eat dog."

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