



Snout and Snout

The thrill of pig races

As they round the corner, a stampede of stubby legs and cloven hooves kick up pulpy clots of wood shavings. The racers ham it up for that challenging final length. Big floppy ears slice the wind like tailfins, and those pink flanks chug like pistons. It's snout and snout as Soapy Smith and Sourdough Jack sizzle for the finish line. The crowd roars. The winner oinks.

This is the excitement of pig racing. If you've never witnessed this porcine sport, you're in for a vision as cute as it is competitive. And thanks to All Alaskan Events Entertainment, anyone attending the Lane County Fair Aug. 17-21 can catch a free gander at this thrilling, family-friendly pastime.

Road manager Donald Noll took over All Alaskan two years ago when his father retired after a quarter century in the circuit. Noll says he starts training his pigs when they are anywhere from 12 to 15 weeks old, after which he takes them on the road from June

through early October — though this season started auspiciously with an April gig at Knott's Berry Farm in California.

The nice thing about pig racing, Noll says — besides the fact that they're so freaking adorable — is that the animals are treated with kindness and respect. "They are driven to race by positive reinforcement," he says, noting that the first pig to cross the finish line gets first crack at the grub. "The food in the trough is kind of like the treat you'd give a dog for doing a trick," Noll explains.

In the end, though, "it's not even really about hungriness," he says. "They have their own little competitions going on. They are incredibly smart. The smarter a pig is, the quicker he'll find a way to win ... Never underestimate a pig," Noll warns.

All pigs are created equal, but some are created more equal than others, at least at times. For instance, Noll has watched certain pigs slyly circumvent the rules to find a shortcut to the trough. Sometimes a pig lifts up the fence and cuts through the middle of the track. "One of the pigs figured out how to jump out of our starting gates," Noll says. "He just trots around the track. The crowd just laughs."

All Alaskan's pig races take place throughout the day Wednesday through Sunday, Aug. 17-21, and are free with fair admission; for updated schedules, visit atthefair.com — *Rick Levin*



ONE OF
MARYBETH
BULLINGTON'S
EWE LAMBS

Black Sheep of the Family

Natural colored fleece at the fair

Lane County's livestock in all its glory will be proudly displayed at the fair, from rabbits and horses to pigeons and poultry. For those of us who somehow missed the Black Sheep Gathering in June, it's time to grab your chance to check out the "natural colored" animals of the ovine variety.

Marybeth Bullington, who breeds natural colored Shetland sheep at Shady Oaks Shetlands in Creswell, says that these sheep, which can come in 11 different colors, are the "Einsteins of the sheep world." Shetlands are a primitive breed, she says, and they are smart and personable because they haven't been bred for other purposes like commercial sheep have.

The black sheep as a metaphor for the quintessential bad kid, out of step with the world, probably got its start from the fact that black sheep used to be culled from the flocks. Bullington says this was because the black fibers would contaminate the white ones, devaluing all the wool it was packaged with, and the black wool was difficult to dye.

These days, black or "natural colored" wool is prized by breeders like Bullington who show their sheep not only at fairs but also at fiber festivals. Bullington says at the fair, a sheep is judged 60 percent on confirmation (its body and build) and 40 percent on its fleece, but it's just the reverse at a fiber festival. A good sheep, she says, is "biomechanically sound" with a "leg at each corner" and a strong, straight back. The wool should be "pleasing to the touch, with luster and brightness — something that you want to get your hands into."

Bullington says she got into breeding her prizewinning sheep — her rams took home champion and reserve at the recent Black Sheep Gathering — because the Shetlands "looked up and wanted attention and wagged their tails." She adds, "I got my hands on their fleece and I was doubly hooked."

She says not only can fairgoers come meet her sheep at the fair, they can see a display of Shetland "fleece on the hoof," fleece that's been prepared and processed, and clothing that's been made of the wool, and the sheep breeders are happy to answer questions.

In addition to Shetlands, the Lane County Fair will feature other breeds of natural colored sheep such as Jacob and Romney sheep, and of course white sheep as well.

Sheep judging begins at 9 am Thursday, Aug. 18, but the sheep and wool display will be there through the fair. — *Camilla Mortensen*