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Lone junior Morgan Orem backs up a trailer between safety cones during an FFA tractor driving contest as adviser Lenn Greer of Irrigon observes her progress Wednesday at the Morrow County Fair in Heppner. Staff photo by E.J. Harris

SMOOTH OPERATORS

Teens challenge their tractor driving skills at Morrow County Fair

By GEORGE PLAVEN
East Oregonian

Behind the wheel of a John Deere tractor towing a 20-foot flatbed trailer, Austin Morter felt perfectly at ease.

"I've been driving since before anybody that age should be driving," said Morter, a 17-year-old junior at Lone Community Charter School. "It just kind of comes second nature to me."

Morter wound his way through a short obstacle course Wednesday morning as part of the FFA tractor driving contest at the Morrow County Fair, slowly maneuvering around bright orange cones set up in a snake-like pattern before backing straight up into a tight space meant to mimic an open barn door.

Beth Dickenson, agricultural science teacher and Heppner FFA adviser, watched from behind and kept a close eye on how each student handled the steering and controls. Safety comes first, Dickenson said, and the kids are judged on everything from whether they grind the gears to whether they remember to wear their seatbelt.

"Lots of kids are doing this all summer. It's their job," Dickenson said.

Advances in technology have changed the face of tractors over the decades — GPS, crop sensors and smartphone apps have come along and made farming a lot more automated than it used to be. But it still takes an operator with instincts and awareness to get the work done.

Reinie Fischer, of Hermiston, has worked with RDO Equipment for 40 years. He started out as a field and shop technician, spent 28 years as a service manager and is now a customer service representative for the company. Fischer has seen tractor technology change significantly over the decades, and admits it's taken him some time to



Lone senior Austin Carter tries to move a bucket of water on a wooden pallet with a forklift tractor Wednesday at the Morrow County Fair in Heppner. Staff photo by E.J. Harris

adjust. "Forty years ago or 30 years ago, it was just buttons or handles or knobs. Now, it's all computer controlled," he said.

The basic operations, however, remain the same. Technology can't account for the surroundings of the area, and Fischer said the driver must know how to make smart decisions.

"The computer can't tell you all of that," he said. "It can get you in trouble

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— Beth Dickenson, agricultural science teacher and Heppner FFA adviser

real quick if you're not safe with what you're doing."

That's where training like FFA comes in handy, especially in predominately agricultural communities like those in Morrow County. Dickenson said the tractor driving contest tests efficiency of operating large machinery, and gives them the skills and confidence to work on neighboring farms.

"That's a life skill," Dickenson said. "There's a lot of adults who can't back up a trailer."

Another part of the FFA contest Wednesday involved using a tractor and forklift to pick up and move pallets, while balancing a bucket full of water to measure their steadiness. Austin Carter, a 17-year-old high school senior from Lone, approached calmly and carefully but couldn't help sloshing some water out of the bucket.

Carter has worked four summers helping a local farmer with his wheat harvest, driving a combine over bright golden fields. He plans to pursue some kind of agricultural degree in college, but said knowing how to operate equipment like tractors is useful beyond just the farm.

"If you ever want to improve your

house or do some kind of yard improvement, it's nice to not have to hire somebody to come drive for you," Carter said.

Carter's father, Scott Carter, a Morrow County sheriff's deputy, praised FFA for its variety of career development activities. Events like tractor driving are just another way to help students bolster their résumés and get ready for life after school, he said.

"What they do for kids is amazing," Scott Carter said. "When they finish, they're ready to go out in the job force."

Fischer said the latest farm technology usually comes quick to younger generations, who are already well versed on their computers and smartphones. John Deere is even beginning to test self-driving tractors, he said. Still, nothing replaces a smooth, confident operator.

"In a farming community like we have here, it's something you really need to know," Fischer said. "Right here at our high schools, our kids get summer jobs on these farms. ... If you get out there and don't even know what a tractor is, you're kind of in trouble."

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Lone junior Austin Morter backs a trailer through a pair of safety cones as adviser Lenn Greer of Irrigon observes during an FFA tractor driving contest Wednesday at the Morrow County Fair in Heppner. Staff photo by E.J. Harris