Good afternoon and thanks for joining us; I am Judy Simpson. Before the advent of tractors workings steer and oxen were used for the heavy work on the farm. Animals did the plowing the logging and the haying. Of course working steer are not as common today but there are still farms that utilize the animals. In the Windsor County Town of Pomfret there's a 4-H club known as the Green Mountain Teamsters. The club is focused on working steer as we learn from this story from Across the Fence’s Rebecca Gollin.

Talk to anyone who has ever trained working steer, and one thing is clear…

Brianna Wood/ 4-H Working Steer Program – “It does take a lot of time, and patience definitely”

Robert Miller / 4-H Working Steer Program – “It's a challenge... trying to get them to do what you want them to do”

Zack Potter/ 4-H Working Steer Program – “They're on a yoke and they have to learn a lot more things than just showing a cow”

Training working steer is hard.

Nats, showing steer -

Lisa Muzzey/ UVM Extension, 4-H Educator – “The kids have 2 steer that are put into a yoke and that work together. They work with them all through the year, to make them easily go through some of these classes that are set up. Today we have stone boat, which they'll pull 1/2 their weight, and the cart class, which is an obstacle course, and fitting and showmanship…These kids work really hard…”

Potter - “You just have to train them single and then go on and then do the hard stuff like backing up then you put like a chain in between their necks and you just work them like that, and then you finally put the yoke on and go on to the cart and the stone pull.”
Miller – “I've been with them for 5 years, they're basically my kids, I’ve taken care of them since they were just little. I got him when he was 2 months, and he was 2 weeks, and I just started leading them around every day.”

Nats, showing steer

Neil Lamson/ 4-H Working Steer Program Leader – “It’s not just punching buttons on a video game and getting better and better at it, you get better at it by lots of hard work and lots of patience,”

Neil Lamson grew up working with oxen. He knows that not everyone is cut out for this sort of work.

Lamson – “They are in a distinct minority, in that they are the only ones in the world now that know how to drive oxen. There's only a few people, the people that are in the pulling ring with the oxen that you see at the fairs or one thing or another, that's not trained steers and oxen to do work, they just pull, and this is an entirely different situation here, so they are an elite group of youngsters, of people, that probably only number a few thousand in the world that know how to drive oxen like this.”

Lamson is the leader of the Green Mountain Teamsters working steer club. He says that working with the animals gives these 4-H’ers skills they can use outside the ring.

Lamson – “In the process of learning how to drive steers, and learning all of the stuff that goes with taking care of large animals, they develop a tremendous amount of responsibility, they have to practice routinely, several times a week, many of them do every day, the animals have to be taken care of every day. I tell the kids that if they want a simple project, get rabbits. You can put them in a cage and forget them, but these guys have to be taken care of, they have to be groomed and fed and cleaned out 365 days a year, and that’s in addition to the training program that they do 1-2 hours a day.”

Not everyone is cut out for this sort of work.

Wood - “The first couple of times you have them on the yoke, they're like what do I do you know, I want to go this way and he's going that way…”

Brianna Wood has been working with oxen since she was 6 years old. She is the 6th generation in her family to train working steer.

Wood – “You start when they're just a couple months old, when they're able to walk, you start walking them up and down the road, and hawing and geeing and backing 'em up, and teaching ‘em commands and stuff, … it takes a lot of time, usually you should train your steers in the morning and then at night, like for an hour each,”

The time spent with the animals will show in the ring. (nats, showing)

Mark Whitney - Chelsea Vermont, judge; assistant leader, Green Mountain Teamsters working steer - 0:17:55.9  “growing up with working steers, it was something different, something no one else was doing…”
The judge today is Mark Whitney, who is 30 years old, and has been involved with 4-H for 22 of those years, first as a member, and now as a volunteer. Whitney has trained working steer since childhood, and still has a pair of pulling oxen that he takes to the fairs.

Mark Whitney - “It’s a hard project, it’s a lot of work, but there's a lot of rewards to it too... it shows the younger generation that hard work isn't a 4 letter word, you can do a lot of hard work and get a lot of fun out of it... you learn patience, you learn how to step back and you know, maybe you need to take a little walk down to babbling brook, and maybe have a little conversation with yourself so that you can calm down and learn how to deal with your nerves.”

Wood – “The joy of getting it is like the joy of winning, that like you've put the time into it so that you actually get the prize like it's like in accomplishment of yourself, but it does, it takes a lot of patience, you have to have patience to be able to work with animals. 'cause they don't understand you, you have to teach them everything. They just want to run, go... And eat.”

Nats, animals

Bringing together hard work and patience to do something not many people could; these 4-H’ers are not afraid of a challenge. In Bradford, I’m Rebecca Gollin with Across the Fence.

Judy.: Thank you Rebecca. With me now are the 4-H volunteers who lead the Green Mountain Teamsters club. It's a pleasure to welcome Terri Chamberlin and her father Neil Lamson. Thanks so much for being with us. Neil how long have you been involved with the workings steer program?

Neil.: I've been involved with the working steer program for about 20 years. Although my family has always had oxen. I gathered sap with my own steers as a boy working on the farm. My father was a well-known ox teamster in the pulling rings in the forties and fifties. My mother's family came to Pomfret in 1798 and continued to farm with a oxen up until the 1940s. She had a very famous trained pair of steers that could kneel and teeter-totter and do all sorts of things. So with role models like that it's natural for me.

Judy.: Tell us about the kinds of things the kids in the Green Mountain Teamsters club are doing?

Neil.: The working steer program and the 4-H program are designed to teach the kids to do everything that is concerned with working steers. That includes choosing the animals training the animals and many times the youngsters don't know anything about working steers. They have to learn how to drive steers and teach the steers at the same time. They also make all of the yolks and bows whips and equipment that goes with it so it's a complete package.

Judy.: Let's start out with the animals. How do you pick a pair? What do you look for?

Neil.: Traditionally when we pick animals its two bull calves and they are selected at very young age. Traditionally we thought that matched pairs were the most handsome and have been the most highly sought after. You pick two animals that might have the same father so they would
grow up looking about the same with the same build and get us past matched as you can. That's basically the beginning part of selecting the calves.

Judy.: So they're usually about the same age?

Neil.: Yes we want the animals to be the same size so when they're working in the yolk they pull together. If you have one very large animal and one small animal they don't pull together evenly so that's important to have the animals like that.

Judy.: Remind us again how the working steer different from oxen?

Neil.: The contest that you see at the fairs is pulling cattle and both types of workings steers were oxen are highly trained animals the pulling cattle are trained to just pull heavy weight short distances. I think that would be like the Olympic weightlifter that's trained specifically to do one thing. The working steer program has animals yoked looking the same as the pulling cattle but they are trained to do the traditional farm work as you mentioned and was mentioned in the video. Pulling carts, stone boats and other implements.

Judy.: So they have to be more versatile than just pulling?

Neil.: They are very much more versatile and the training takes a good deal longer.

Judy.: I was going to say tell me a little bit about how long it takes to train to become a working pair?

Neil.: To be a proficient working pair it takes about two years for the animals to be trained well enough to get to be efficient working in the yolk. As you saw in the video with Brianna it starts when they're very young, usually about a month old and be taken out one at a time teach them to the lead in the halter and learn basic commands to turn whoa and backup. It's very difficult to teach cattle to back up. They do not want to backup they want to look where they're going. They have to completely trust the driver when they are taught to back up. Once you have mastered the commands for the individual you bring them up and walk two of them side by side for another month or so. By the time they're three or four months old then you introduce them to the yoke. You put the yoke on them they've been walking side by side for a month no new chains. Repetition and gentle training is the way you do the working steers.

Judy.: Terry how did you get started in the program?

Terry.: I got started following my dad here and the family tradition of working with steers just came natural to be a part of what I did.

Judy.: Do you have a team now that you are working with?

Terry.: I have two pairs at this point. I have a pair of six year old Devon’s and a pair of six month old Hereford Croft steers.

Judy.: Working through a team doesn't help you when you work with kids who are trying to learn this?
Terry.: Yes because lots of times I've been through the same experiences that they're going through at this point in training and I can look back and say we need to try this to to see if this helps you better as opposed to what you're doing now.

Judy.: You mentioned patience because of dealing with two animals with minds of their own. Is it hard for such young kids to grasp that and be patient and hang in there with their team?

Terry.: Yes it is a project that takes a lot of patience. You start with three individuals here and by the end of the project you all become a team. You learn your patience you learn to have patience with them and you continue on and eventually you all learn each other and know your space know what you can do and you know what they can do.

Judy.: How about some of the skills that kids learn as part of this program? Hopefully it will keep with them for life.

Terry.: It's a lot of hard work. You learn to communicate with other people. Working hard on the job. You learn to cooperate. Decision-making. Recordkeeping is involved in that the kids have a book that they keep track of all their expenses time spent the animals. There's a lot of skills to it. When you stop and think it can be a very broad project.

Judy.: Tell me a little bit about taking care of these animals because they're big and as you mentioned in the video every day they have to be taken care of fed brushed and groomed and it's a lot of work.

Neil.: It is a lot of work and that's the biggest thing the kids learn when having working steers. It's a lot of work but it's worth the work in the end but you have to discipline yourself to say I have to do it today. I don't want to come home after school and work with my steers I want to play video games like my friends to but I have this project I need to work on and learn that hard work pays off.

Judy.: Is that what keeps the kids going is that they see yes if I put the time in and work with these animals all the sudden they are listening to me.

Neil.: They do listen the word is there and if you've ever handled beef cattle or other animals that have not been highly trained like this the first thing they do is run away when they get scared. Here you have a pair of the same kind of animals out there that are doing amazing things that working steers can do. The rewards are just tremendous.

Judy.: Watching the video the kids in the show ring going through the paces and these animals it almost looks like it's effortless. Just a flick of the wrist from one of the kids and the animals are backing up turning and just following them.

Terry.: That goes with all the training that we do the stress on it that its voice and motion. When you need to use are with a little sterner you can but you want to achieve that goal that when you say ha and move your whip they will come to.

Judy.: Tell me a little bit about what the kids involved need? Do they have their own place to keep their cattle? Do they have to purchase their cattle?
Terry.: Sometimes we allow people to lease a pair of animals to use but yes they do need a place
to house their animals and keep them managed whether it's in the barn or whether it's a well
fenced in area. They need a place to be able to do that.

Judy.: Let's remind viewers before we start off in the summer show season of field days and so
forth. As they're watching maybe one of these classes which is to keep in mind?
People that don't know anything about steers and oxen what should they keep in mind you think?

Neil.: They should keep in mind that somebody has put hours and weeks and years into the work
that it takes to have these animals highly trained like this. You can tell an expert because they
make it look easy.

Judy.: Before we go if you'd like more information about the working steer program or any other
4-H opportunity you can call the State 4-H Office at the toll free number on your screen that's 1-
(800)-571-0668 you can also find out 4-H information on the website by visiting UVM
Extension’s website. Thank you very much for joining us today. I'm Judy Simpson. We will see
you again next time on Across the Fence.

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