

Selecting 4-H pigs

By: Ryan Harrell

There are several things to consider when selecting a 4-H pig project. You need to consider the health of the pig, the breed you want to show, your housing and feeding program, evaluate the age of the pig and its size, the ethics of the breeder, has the little pig been fed paylean, who is the dam and sire of the pig, and judge the pig (quality).

When selecting a pig, one of the most important areas to evaluate is structure and depth of body. The pig must be sound and be able to make it up to weight. The pig must have some depth of body because if the pig is too narrow it won't feed out as fast or efficient. Depth of body can show the pig's ability to feed out. It is best to select a pig that has been on full feed or was recently fed. Pigs in sales sometimes have been toyed with, "juiced up" and have not been fed for a period of time.

The pig's toes should be even and square when standing. When looking at the toes you can tell how the pig stands and walks on its feet and legs. If the pig has poor structure the toes will not be even.

You want the pig to be wide based when viewed from behind. The pig needs to stand and track wide from behind. They must also stand and track wide in the chest when coming toward you. Yet, be careful some pigs are too wide chested and based. They are considered bow legged and are structurally unsound. Pigs that track narrow in the front and the back won't have the correct muscle pattern and development in the right areas once they have finished out. Narrow chested pigs most likely won't have the correct rib shape that is desired in pig selection. Narrow based pigs won't develop enough muscle in the lower portion of its ham later when it finishes out at 250 lbs or greater. Some pigs will be wide based and wide chested but they are shallow flanked. They must be balanced from the chest floor to the ham, while the flank is dropped down level with the chest floor.

Balance and eye appeal are something to consider in 4-H pigs. Balance is when a pig is proportional in its depth, leanness, structure, muscle shape, and viewed from the side. Balance is also when the pig is leveled topped. Pigs can have some slope downward to their hip and tail setting. Yet pigs should not slope downhill from the tail to the head or shoulders of the pig. Pigs should also not have a break or dip behind their shoulders. Dips behind the shoulder are a clear sign for pigs that are structurally incorrect. The shoulder blades are pushed too far forward and the pig will take short choppy strides on their front feet.

Length of body is something to consider when selecting young pigs. The pig needs to be moderately long but not too long or too short. When pigs get too long they tend to walk narrow, have a shallow chest and flank. Extremely long pigs might not have a large enough loin when they finish out. Yet, pigs that are too short in body will only get shorter and wider as they grow. Finding a happy medium is the best choice.

When looking at a pig from behind and down their top, they need to stand and track wide, be wide in the ham with some muscle shape, then be thinner and narrower down their top, and wider again in their shoulders.

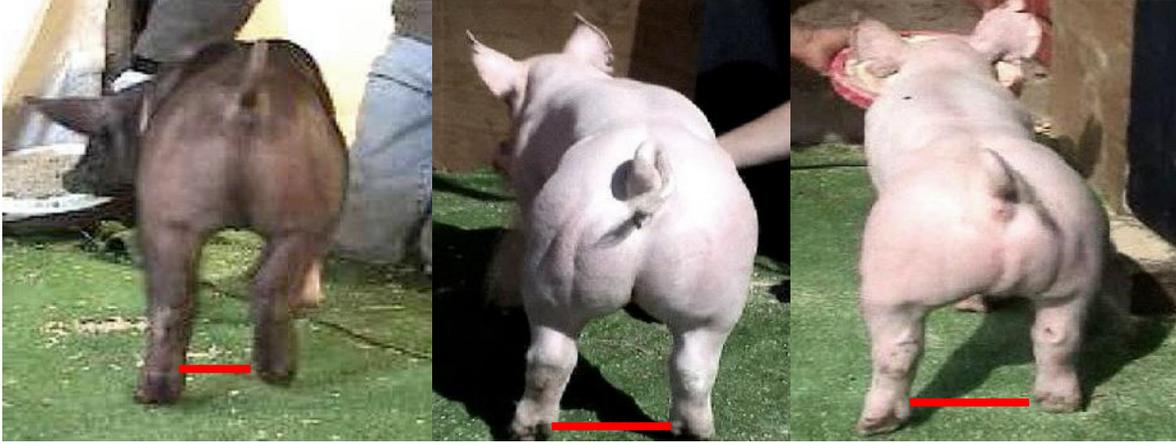
Don't select pigs that may appear to be too heavy muscled. Pigs that are extremely heavy muscled when they are younger will most likely have structure problems later. As the pig grows the muscle will develop more. So a heavy muscled pig will become even heavier muscled later and become very tight in motion.

My best advice is to select a pig that fits the best of all the areas. Don't pick a pig that is great in one area and not in another. Find a nice happy medium and don't select the wider tracking pig that has a dip. Nor select the heavy muscled pig with bad feet and legs.

Learning How to Judge Structure:

The main things to remember when judging structure are: width, angles, and toes.

Width:



Too Narrow

Ideal for Width

Too Wide

When looking at the pig's chest you should consider the same factors as they stand and as they move toward you. Being too narrow or wide in the chest is a structural problem. Try to find the ideal width of chest and it should match the same amount of width as the width of base.



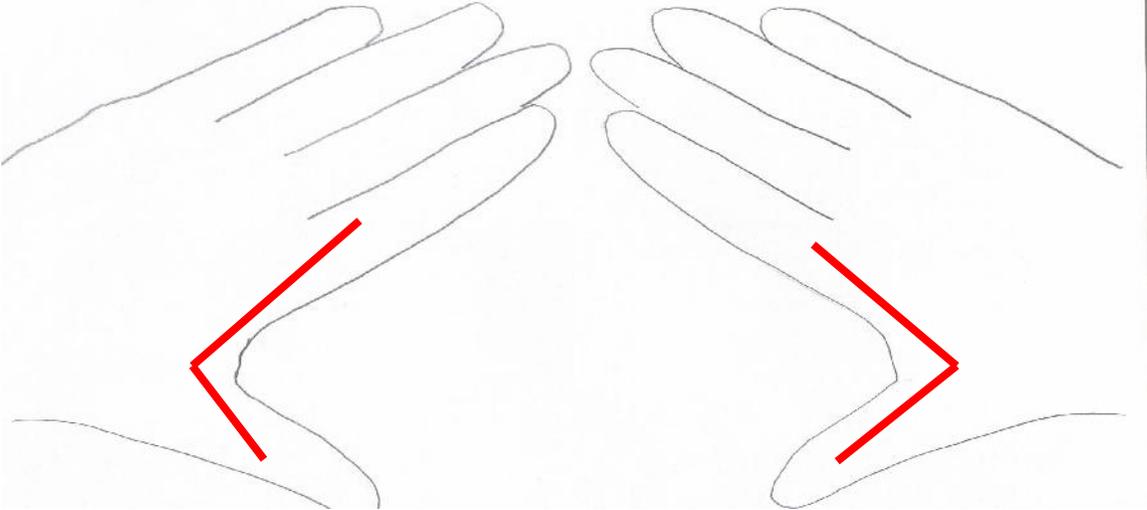
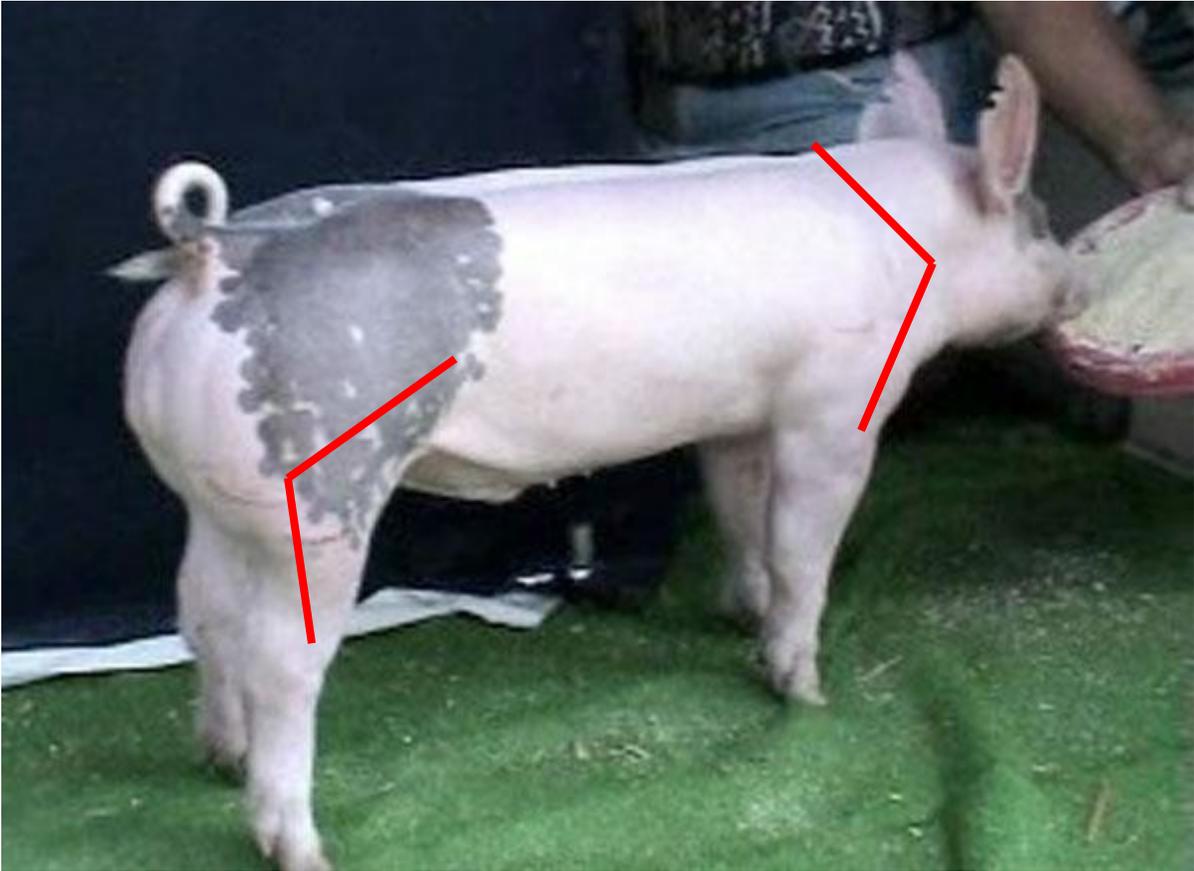
Ideal for Width

Ideal for Width

Angles:

The easiest way to judge pig structure, is to learn what the ideal angles are. Most 4-H members, producers, and some judges seem to struggle when it comes to properly evaluating structure. The easiest way to think about structure is to use your right and left hands. Hold your hands out and make an L shape with your four fingers pointing up and your thumb pointing to the side. Place your left hand at an angle with the pig's back legs. Then place the right hand at an angle with the pig's shoulders. The top of the shoulder should be the top of your finger tips. The inside part of your hand between your thumb and pointer finger should fit at the place where the shoulder and leg connects.

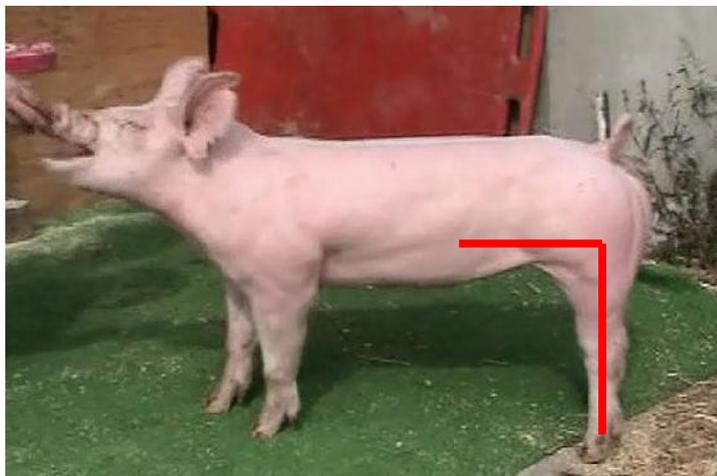
The Perfect Angles on a Pig for Structure:



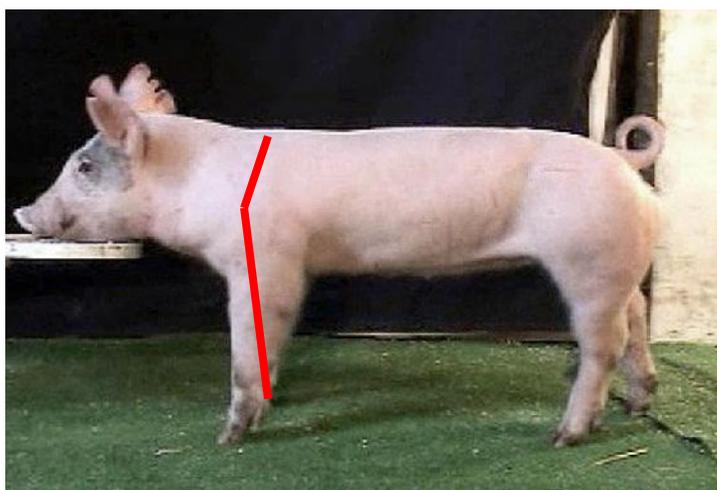
Left Hand

Right Hand

Here are some examples of the incorrect angles for structure:



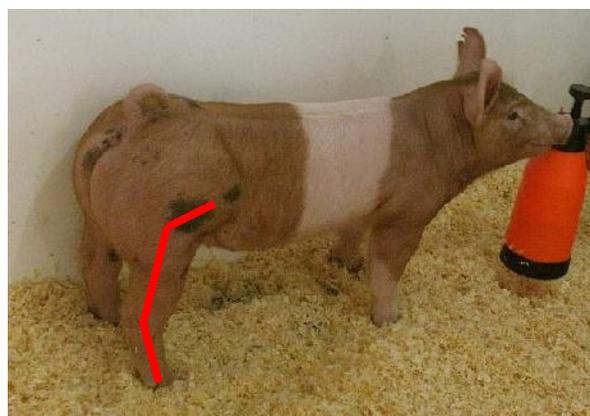
Too Straight on Her Back Legs with Hardly Any Angle



Too Straight on His Front Legs and Shoulder Angle

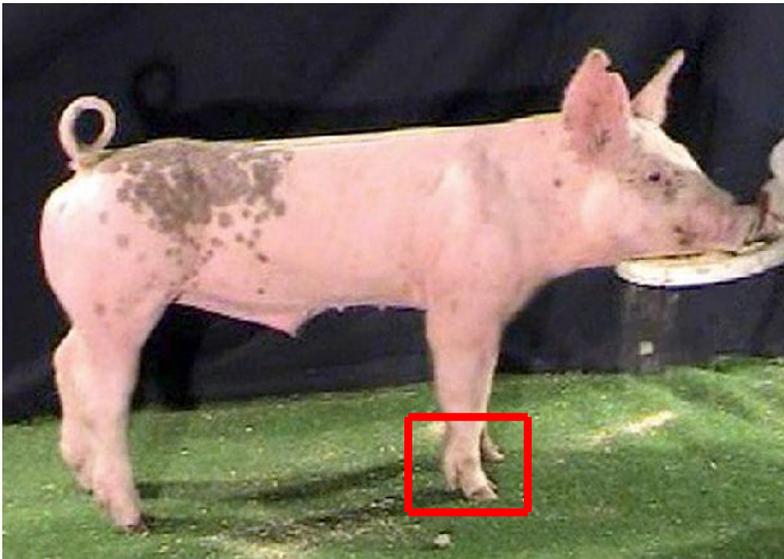


Too Many Wrong Angles on Her Rear Legs



Toes:

Make sure the pigs toes are even and stands down on them square. The pig should have strong pasterns and some angle to the knees, pasterns, and toes.



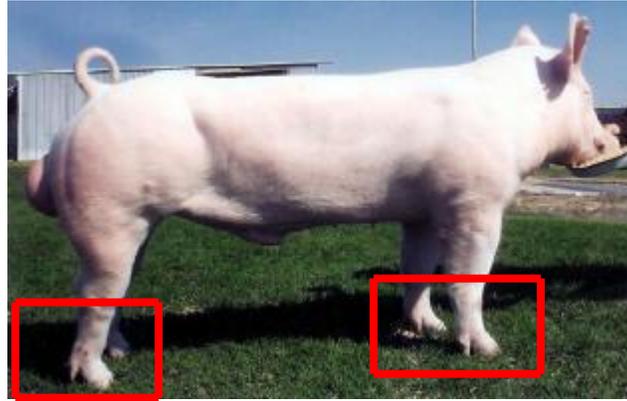
This Pig Has Nice Even Front Toes



The front feet should be square as well as the rear feet.



This Pigs Does Not Stand Down Square on Her Toes. Notice the Twist Out and the Toes won't be even.



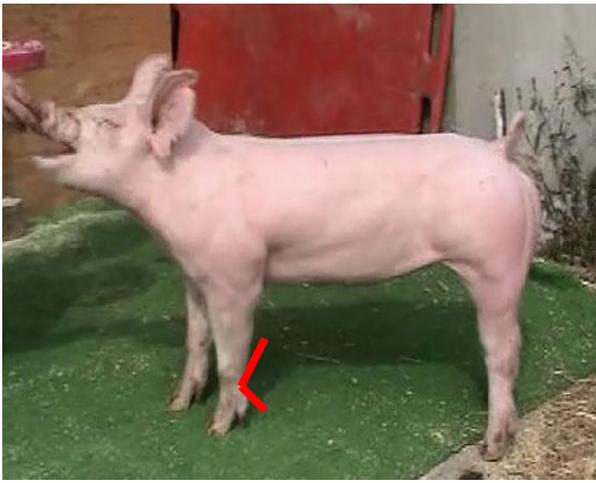
This Boar has Weak Front and Rear Pasterns. The Dewclaws touch the Ground.



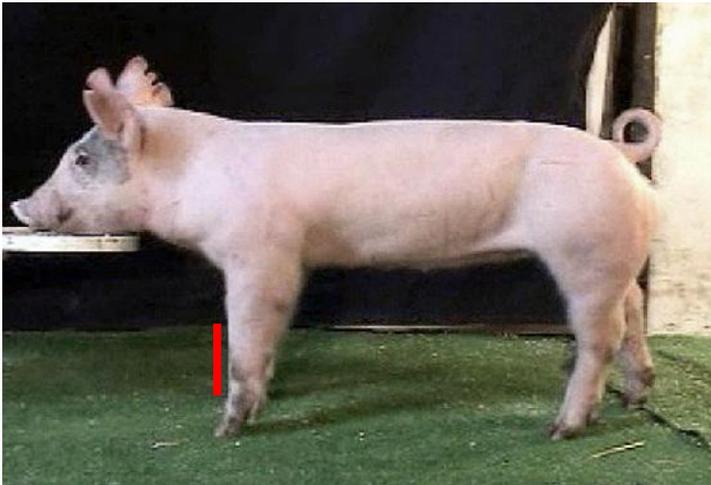
If buying pigs online, look for breeders who take pride in showing their pig's feet and toes.



This pigs front feet are covered in saw dust. Are they hiding weak pasterns?



This Pig Has a More Ideal Angle To Her Knees, Pasterns, and Toes.



This Pig Has No Angle To His Knees, Pasterns, and Toes. This Pig Has Structure Problems!

Judging Bone Circumference:



Fine Boned



Moderate to Big Boned



Big Boned

When looking for bone circumference, look at the size of the cannon bone, leg bones and foot. The depth of circumference of the bone is how we determine a big, moderate or fine boned pig.

How to Judge for Balance:

These Pigs are Balanced:



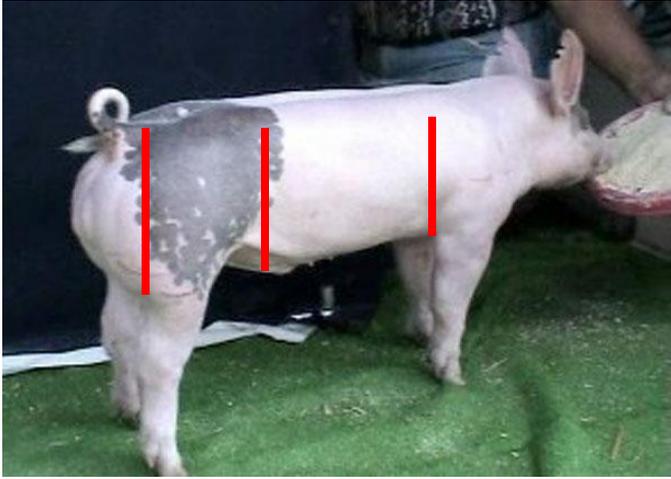
It has a level top, proportional in muscle shape, ham is proportioned to the shoulders, wide chested, and deep about the flank.

This Pig is Not Balanced:

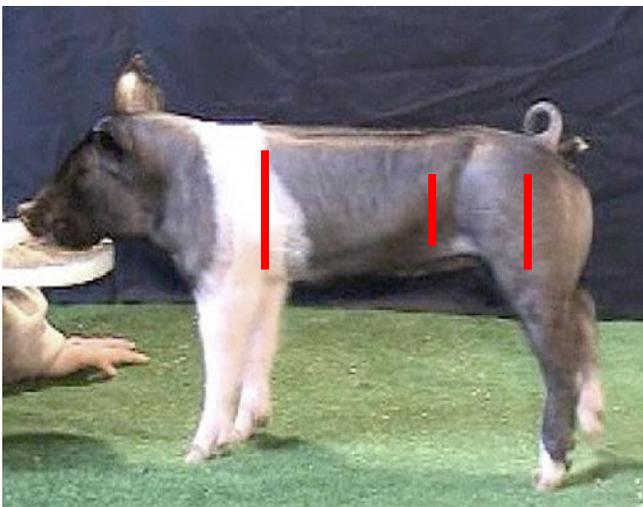


He lacks the ham shape and balance from the back half to match his front half. His ham shape is not as deep as the depth of his shoulders.

How to Judge for Depth of Body:



This pig has excellent depth of body, depth of chest, deep in his rib, and deep in his flank. He even has some depth to his ham to match the depth of body. Thus, he has balance in all of these qualities.



This pig lacks depth of rib, rib shape, and depth of flank. This pig could be considered shallow ribbed and flanked. Ideally, you would like to select a pig with more fill in the middle section of its gut. This pig could later be a slow grower and a hard doer.

How to Detect Health:

Try to select a healthy looking pig in comparison to the rest of the pigs in the pen. Look for hair coat, gut fill, and check the stool of the pig, if they look cold or weak.



This pig appears to be unhealthy, cold, dehydrated, and somewhat listless. Her ears and face doesn't look like she feels the best.



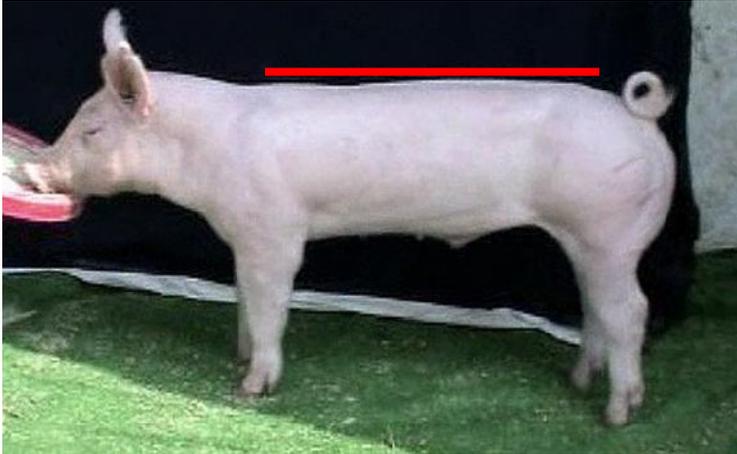
Young pigs can be hard to visualize if they are healthy yet or not. Sometimes they may appear to be somewhat unhealthy but they may just be going through some stressful times from weaning and adapting to feed.



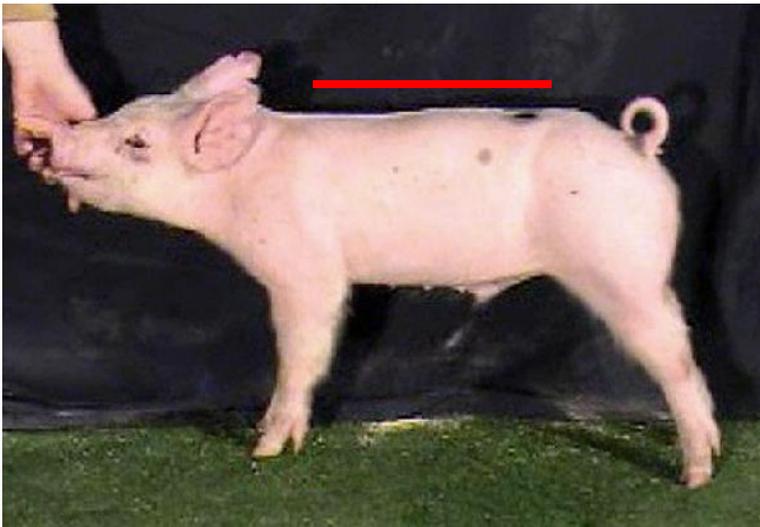
This pig appears to be healthy, full, and in good condition to continue to grow.

How to Judge for Length of Body:

Length of Body can be detected by seeing the distance from the point of the shoulders to the ham loin junction. Pigs should be fairly long bodied when selecting 4-H prospect pigs.



This Pig is Ideal in His Length of Body for His Age and Size. Plus He is Very Structurally Correct



This Pig is Short Bodied for His Age and Size

How to Judge for Muscle:



This Black Gilt is too Light Muscled for Her Size and Age



This Pig is Ideal for Muscle at This Age and Size



This Pig Might have a Bit Too Much Muscle at this Age and Size

Picking a Breed to Show:

Before you buy a 4-H project, it is best to already know what breed you might be interested in showing. Some people pick the breeds that the judge may raise. This sometimes does work and some judges do pick the breeds they raise or show some favoritism to those breeds. Pick a breed that fits your feeding program and housing environment. Some breeds are heavier muscled or sounder while others might be more durable in a dirt environment. Certain breeds grow slower than other and so you need to take this into consideration upon selection.

Pick the Pig Based on Your Housing and Feeding Program:

Only you know which pigs will work best in your program. It is important to select a pig that will adapt easily to your housing, pen size, feeder, fountain, and flooring.

Select a Pig with the Right Age and Size:

It is important to select a pig that is the right size and age for your fair. Some people like to have bigger pigs so they can hold, while others just want to push a pig on full feed all summer long. A pig should be the right age and follow the rules that your fair has outlined. A certain aged pig can be shown in your fair. Anything older or young isn't supposed to be shown according to the rules. Pick a pig that will be the right size for you several months later at the fair. Try to hit the acceptable weight when it comes show day. Pigs need to weigh about 235-280 lbs at the fair. A little pig should weigh from 35-80 lbs and sometimes they can be as big as 120 lbs. Just remember how fast they can grow and it is easier to hold than push a pig to weight. Holding a pig for a long period of time will show in its hair coat and its appearance will become stale.

Learn about the Dam and Sire:

Pigs with good genetics will develop and become good pigs. Sometimes pigs with just ok genetics might not develop into a winner. My best advice, is to learn about the Sire and Dam's pedigree. Understanding the bloodlines by looking on the Internet or reading magazines will help you learn what pigs are winner. Learning what blood lines are hot and the ones that are not. Usually pigs that have several good blood lines or a long list of winners in their pedigree, seem to have the potential to do well.

Know the Breeders Ethics:

It is important to know the breeders ethics and know how they run their business. Unfortunately some breeders feed little pigs diets that might make them look good and sell good. Yet, the diet will mess the pig up once the kid takes them home to grow all summer long. Some breeders feed little pigs Paylean to make them look more muscular and defined. Paylean is not made for little pigs and this will mess up your pig's development. A pig that has been fed Paylean at a young age will not grow very well, will be lighter muscled when they get older, and will mess up the metabolism of the pig.

How do you know if a Little Pig has been Fed Paylean:

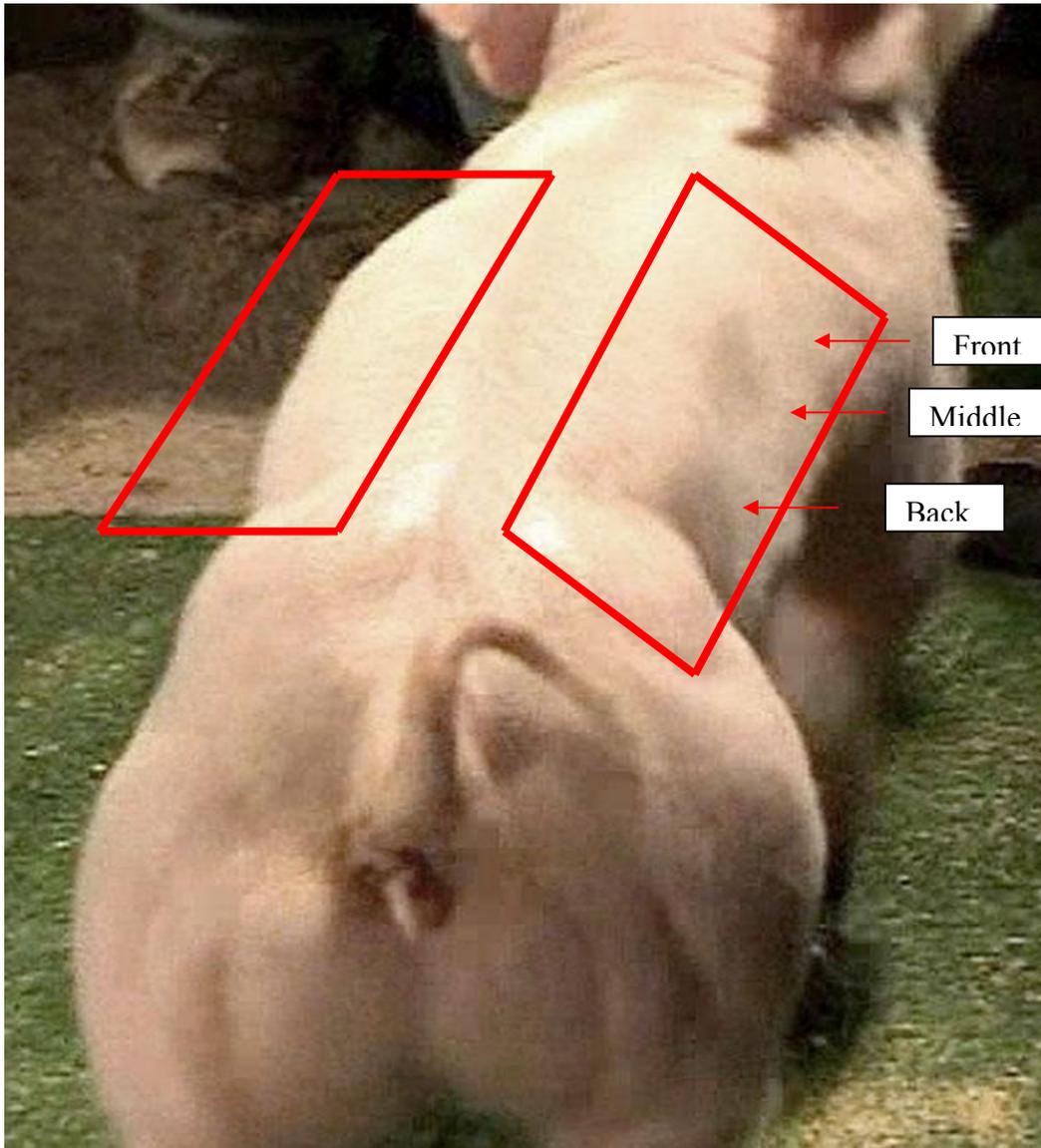
Paylean is not made for breeding stock, gilts, or little pigs. Paylean works by making existing muscle cells expand and fill up with water. It is very important to provided full water for pigs that are fed Paylean. Little pigs are still trying to develop and create muscle up until they reach about 200 lbs. Paylean also reduces fat on the pig's body in certain areas. Little pigs do not have much fat because they are trying to develop muscle, increase bone density, and continue to grow. Feeding a little pig Paylean will make them look nice but will mess up the development of the pig. Thus, when kids buy Paylean fed pigs they will take

them home and the pig will continue to look bad. Some pigs might come back around while other may never come back to its potential.

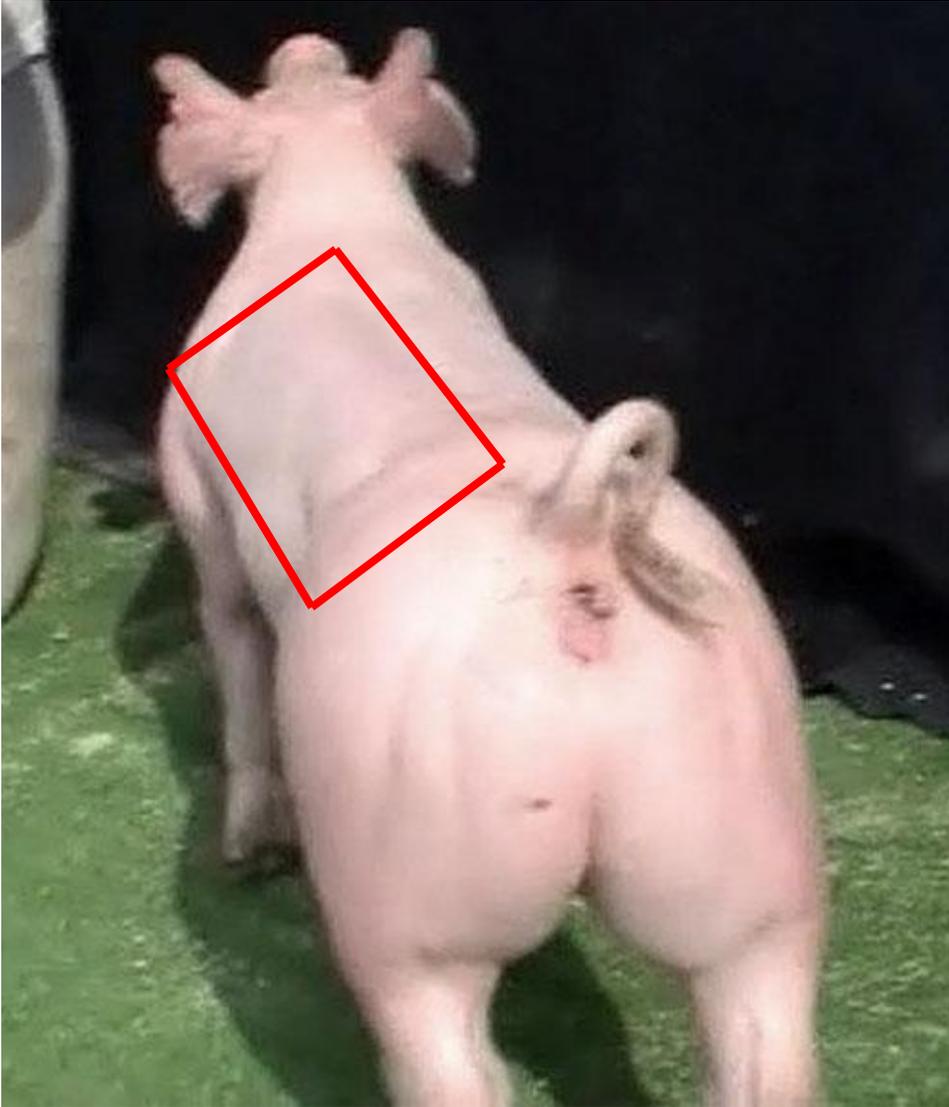
How do you know if a little pig has been fed Paylean? In market size pigs 235-280 lbs who have been fed Paylean, they all have the same indication if they have been fed Paylean or not. Where do you look to see if a pig has been fed Paylean? The Loin Eye Area is the place to tell if the pig has been fed Paylean. In Paylean fed hogs the loins muscle cells will expand with water. Yet, the expansion is not evenly proportional on the loin. Either the loin has more muscle cells in the front and the back or else the middle portion of the loin doesn't get the same amount of water intake. Look at a Paylean fed hog and you will see the front part of the loin by the ribs will be larger and fuller in comparison to the middle part of the loin. Then compare the back part of the loin which connects to the ham. The middle will be washed out compared to the back as well. This is how all pigs loins appear who have been fed paylean.

In a good ethical farm that raises pigs, Paylean will not be fed to the little pigs for a sale. Normal pigs have a fully developed loin that is proportion in the front, middle, and the back.

Here is an example of a little pig that has been fed Paylean. Notice it's washed out at the Loin Eye Area.



Here is another example of a little pig that has been fed Paylean.



ARRIVAL & PREMISE PREPARATION

Provide a clean environment and comfortable living area.

- a. Cleaned from the previous show season and free from fecal and urine contamination.
- b. Low Dust.
- c. Protected from excess sun and wind.
- d. Well ventilated.
- e. Large enough for reasonable room to explore and exercise.
- f. Easy to clean and disinfect.
- g. East access to water and feed containers, and be able to closely monitor consumption of each.
- h. Trailers used for transportation should be cleaned from the excrement of previous occupants before loading.

Many of the health problems that we encounter in the life of a show animal are attributable to the way we handle them early in the transition period. As animals are moved to new environments, they are stressed. This stress leads to problems that can decrease the ability of the animal to fight off the diseases they will be

exposed to. Usually there is much mixing and mingling of animals during this phase of their lives. This mixing leads to exposure to large numbers of diseases causing pathogens and, when coupled the immune-suppression that comes with stress, can lead to devastating effects on the animal's health. Anything we can do to decrease the stress in the animals will help decrease the amount of sickness.

It is important to maintain the health of your pig. The first 2 or 3 weeks are critical, so you should check your pigs several times each day during this period. Strong appetites, body temperatures of 102.5° F, sleek hair coats, and tightly curled tails are all signs of a healthy pig. Healthy pigs are active and alert with bright looks in their eyes.

A pig will give you many clues when it isn't feeling well. Some of the clues are poor appetite, gauntness, rough hair coat, a dull look in the eyes, excessive coughing, diarrhea, inactivity and lameness. If you think a pig is sick, take its rectal temperature. If it is 2 degrees or more above normal, call a veterinarian immediately.

Minimal mixing and a clean, comfortable environment will get the animals off to a good start and make the rest of the feeding period more productive. Move to a permanent home as soon as possible. Give a couple of days of rest and adjustment before giving vaccinations. Offer fresh water as well as electrolyte water for 3-5 days post arrival.

It is often a good idea to give prophylactic antibiotics during this period of time. Drugs such as Penicillin and Tetracycline are often used for such situations. An injection of B-vitamins can also be helpful.

Start off on a mild ration with gradual changes to hotter nutritional plan. Feed additives such as Probiotics and a balanced vitamin/mineral package can have a positive effect during the transition time and make available more of the nutrients required for a good immune response to the vaccines.

Any time that animals that have not been previously exposed to one another are brought together, there is a large chance for sickness to develop. Terminal shows are not as big of a problem as county and local shows which usually results in the animals coming back home. Stress is often at an all time high for the animals due to the feeding and water activities that often go on at the show. Most animals are intentionally dehydrated and fed a ration that may be lacking in some of the needed nutrients in order to have them physically at their best. Dehydration can be detrimental to some of the animal's inherent defense mechanisms and result in a larger susceptibility to infection.