

Preventing Lameness in Show Pigs

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Lameness is one of the most common problems in show pigs. There are a variety of causes, including injury, arthritis and structural stress that can cause your animal to look less than its best in the showing. Not all lameness can be prevented, but precautions can be taken to prevent the dreaded problem. The following is by no means an inclusive list, but contains some of the most common causes of swine lameness.

Skeletal Structure. Many lameness problems are caused simply by the way the feet and legs of the animal are aligned and the angularity of the joints. In an earlier article, I stressed the importance of examining the feet and leg soundness of the animals before purchase. Any problems that are apparent in young animals are most likely going to get worse as more weight and stress is placed on the joints and bones as the animal grows. The animal should stand wide at the base and step out with a long, easy stride. Animals that appear “tight” in their structure will only get tighter and stiffer as they age. In an attempt to make pigs “taller fronted”, many producers have selected for animals that are too straight in their joints. Angulation in the joints (especially the elbow, shoulder, stifle and hock) is necessary for shock absorption during movement. A level design is also a good indication of structural soundness. Animals that “roach” or arc in their top are usually heavy muscled, but often have severe structural problems that may interfere with their performance in the ring. Muscle can only attach to bone, and extremely heavy muscled pigs often show signs of lameness due to the stress that is put upon the bones by the excess muscle.

Flooring. While cement is by far the best flooring from a disease standpoint, it can be hard on the feet and legs of your pig. Many animals have absolutely no problems when housed on cement, and it is often those pigs that have some structural problems that get irritated and sore. Wood shavings or sand placed on top of the cement may add some cushion if you see a problem developing. Regardless of what flooring you chose, make sure that it is not slippery, especially when wet. Wood that is wet from water or urine can be extremely slick, causing pigs to slip and possibly injure themselves. It is also a good idea to check out the flooring of the trailer that you are going to be using to transport your pigs and make adjustments if necessary.

Injury. While most injuries heal, there is always the chance of it becoming a chronic problem. Fighting at the feeder, slipping during transport to the show, extremes in exercise (doing too much too quickly) or other injuries should obviously be kept at a minimum. Common sense goes a long way in prevention of injuries, but not all of them can be avoided.

Bacterial Infection. The most common infection of joints is mycoplasma, specifically *Mycoplasma hyosynoviae*. This organism often affects new animals, which may pick up the mycoplasma from carrier animals that appear to be healthy, but are harboring the microorganisms in their tonsils for many months. After a stress, such as transport, a wave of mycoplasma may afflict your pigs. Consultation with a veterinarian is important. Once mycoplasma is diagnosed, injectable tylosin or lincomycin is usually recommended. If given early enough (within 24 hours) and repeated daily for 2-3 days, these treatments are somewhat effective.

Osteochondrosis. This disease affects the cartilage within the joints and is usually diagnosed with the help of X-rays. Veterinary assistance is usually required.

The keys to preventing lameness are twofold: first, make feet and leg soundness a priority, much like muscling and leanness, when selecting your pigs. Secondly, observe your pigs closely every day without fail. At the first signs of lameness (often apparent at feeding time by the constant shifting of the feet (front, back, or both) while standing at the feeder) take the proper measures IMMEDIATELY. A “wait and see” attitude will most likely result in a chronic problem, haunting your project all the way into the showing.