



Chicken Love

Mayhem and Mischief are trouble makers, Chaylin Stephens explained, as she bent down to pick up one of the black and white speckled roosters pecking at her shoe. The aptly-named Mayhem squawked and flapped his wings as she grabbed him and deftly flipped him on his back on the trampoline in her backyard, at which point he promptly mellowed.

"You're not going to like this much," she explained to the rooster as she prodded his belly and straightened a wing, ticking off a laundry list of things that the 4-H judges will be looking for when she competes this summer at the Campbell County Fair.

There's not a whole lot that Chaylin doesn't know about chickens. She's literally been around them for her entire life and has a binder full of chicken facts she's memorized. She can identify a chicken by its comb type, country of origin and can tell you the color of its eggs. At age 14, she's won two first-place showmanship belt buckles and a handful of second places, and competed for the first time in open class when she was only 16 months old.

What can she say? She just loves chickens.

"They're actually very entertaining," she said matter-of-factly as she returned Mayhem to the pen and scoped around for a more compliant practice bird. Right now, she's trying out about five or six

chickens to see which one will be her showmanship bird. She'll show 25 birds at fair in total. The showmanship chicken has to be easy-going with a trainable disposition, which pretty much rules out the roosters.

Her ringer, a black and white Mille Fleur Belgian Bearded d'Uccle hen named Missy, is currently out of commission due to an injury. She doesn't know what happened, but one day she came into the coop to find Missy and another rooster limping. She thinks there was probably a skirmish, but you never know when it comes to chickens. For now, Missy is in the basement recuperating with the newborns, and has left Chaylin in need of a backup.

Feathers flap in a cloud of dust as the birds make a beeline to dodge Chaylin's quick-draw hands as she ducked down. She cornered one trying to escape through the bird-size door into the hen house.

As far as chicken coops go, Chaylin's borders on fancy. Her stepdad, Tron, refurbished it out of an abandoned storage trailer on the family's 14-acre spread south of Gillette off Highway 50.

Her dad, knowing her passion for chickens, fully customized the coop into designated areas for three different groups, depending on their age and demeanor. And he doesn't even like chickens.

The newly hatched chicks are kept warm in the basement for about three weeks before making it out to the round galvanized metal water tank, where they're confined under a heat lamp. Off to their right is a caged area that Chaylin built last

weekend with her dad. Behind the chicken wire, a handful of white ducks snuggle together while two cantankerous roosters pace back and forth. This is the avian equivalent to a time out, so they'll be here until they settle down and learn to behave. The remainder of the coop is relegated to the laying hens, who have the lion's share of space, complete with two outdoor pens, yard access and an indoor room with sleeping perches and nesting boxes, already full of eggs.

She gets at least a dozen multi-colored eggs per day, most of which she sells to friends of the family, except for the free ones that go to her gymnastics coach. Along with egg duty, she is also responsible for cleaning out the coop at least once a week and food and watering—chores for which her mother has to give her a time frame or otherwise she might stay down there all day.

Like her coop, Chaylin's chickens are also pretty fancy, and much like her showmanship skills, continue to become more sophisticated over time. Hers are the pedigree chickens, like Brahmas, Crevecoeurs, Auracanas and the fluffy-crowned, souped-up Polish.

Around her feet, chickens of all colors and sizes squawk, flap their wings and peck at dust as they go about their day. Some are pretty exotic looking with poufs of feathery sideburns and flowing, regal crowns sprouting out on the tops of their heads as they prance daintily like runway models in Russian fur caps and 4-inch heels.

One circles the room with a high-pitched, sing-song squawk, which Chaylin imagines is her way of ordering the other chickens around.

"Follow me, follow me," Chaylin mimicked in tune with the bird.

Beauty has its limitations, though, as Chaylin's mom Lin pointed out. As if on cue, one of the fancy, white plumed hens head-butted the wire fence trying to find the opening back in.

"The fancy chickens are not the brightest of bulbs," Lin observed.

This is what Chaylin loves about her chickens; they all definitely have a distinct personality and no two chickens are alike.

Her favorite ones are the Belgian Bearded d'Uccles, which you can't buy around here. Her neighbor ordered the eggs from Pennsylvania and hatched them for her for around \$15 a bird. Right now, she has about 17 of them and is planning to





breed them and sell their eggs. Money that will go to fund gymnastics, which along with the chickens, consumes most of her time.

She tries to give all of her chickens names – Pecky, Humdrum, Sparrow – but as she points out, with close to 80 birds, you kinda start to run out of ideas.

For now, she's content helping her younger sister, 8-year-old Chyla, get ready for her first chicken competition at fair.

"I'm pretty nervous," Chyla said, smiling up at her sister. Up until now, Chyla has stayed busy raising her two not-so-miniature pigs.

"It's pretty easy when you get the hang of it," Chaylin said, describing how she puts Vaseline on the chicken's combs, wattles and feet and even paints their toenails for fun.

She's hoping for another first-place win this year, which is her goal: to nab first place in each

of the three divisions. But either way, she's already ahead of her own record and just enjoys spending time with the birds.

Chaylin smiled as she picked up a large black and white speckled hen and nuzzled it against her chin while her mother shrugged and crinkled her nose.

By: *Jem* C. Kocher