

## If they wanted to win the top prize, they needed to put in more hours.

That's what the five Fyffe High School students concluded as they drove home from the 2012 Alabama state FFA competition. They had come in second. The next year's competition would most likely be their last shot too, since

four out of the five would be seniors at their small north Alabama school. Or as Marty Myers, their FFA sponsor, says: "This is the last rodeo for most of them."

The high school boys weren't vying for ribbons for their prized Holstein heifer or Rhode Island Red rooster, however. Instead, what John Hicks, Tom George, Jesse McClendon, Avery Rains and Levi Thompson needed to train were strings on a banjo, three guitars and a mandolin.

"We don't know nothing about chickens," says George, laughing. George, who plays mandolin, admitted he unsuccessfully tried showing poultry a few years ago. "All we know is music."

And, boy, do they know music.

The Fyffe High School FFA String Band, now known as Pickett's Charge, has enjoyed considerable success. The teenagers have appeared on RFD-TV, served as grand marshals at Fyffe's Christmas parade, been booked for a variety of events and will release their second CD in 2014.

All the members of this five-piece ensemble fell in love with music at a young age. George, with a musically inclined family, started playing when he was only 7. Hicks, lead vocalist, began singing almost as soon as he began talking and played guitar at age 9. McClendon plays bass guitar and sings tenor. He first played guitar when he was 9 or 10. At 12 or 13, Thompson started playing the banjo. Rains, guitarist, began strumming at a tender age as well.

The guys are songwriters, too. For the competition, they decided to include original tunes as part of the three-song requirement. While most bands perform bluegrass at the state competition, the repertoire of Pickett's Charge includes country and western and gospel, as well as bluegrass.

### FFA Means More Than Most Think

To an outsider, it might seem odd that an organization founded more than 85 years ago to, as its web site states, "prepare future generations for the challenges of feeding a growing population" would recognize and reward musical talent.

Yet the organization's Career Development Events program does just that. Besides awards for swine and goat production, dairy evaluation and tractor

driving, the National FFA Organization honors members who excel at such endeavors as public speaking and crime prevention.

"Everybody stereotypes ag, thinking it's just cows and plows. If you look at the industry, there are more jobs in the world not directly producing food but manufacturing it, hauling it or marketing," says Myers. "Ag teaches leadership, not just farming and plowing. It tries to get them ready for real life."

Music has always been a part of a farmer's recreational time, he adds. "If they play an instrument, most farmers end up sitting on the front porch [playing] at the end of the day," Myers says.

The Alabama FFA began holding its annual string band contest in the early 1940s. Going into the June 2013 competition, Pickett's Charge knew that Arab High School was the band to beat. Danville High School took the win in 2012, but the Arab competitors formed their string band while the members were in seventh grade, and won the state competition in 2010 and 2011.

"This is the farthest that Fyffe's FFA has ever been. They won district two years in a row," Myers says. The state is divided into North, Central and South districts. The top two bands from each district compete at state. In 2012, Fyffe took first place in the North District FFA and continued to the state FFA contest where they placed second—prompting their pact to rehearse more. Every Monday evening since, they had set up in the Hickses' living room to practice, week in and week out, leading up to the 2013 state competition.

Now it was time to see if all those hours of stringing, strumming and singing would pay off.

On competition day, the members of Pickett's Charge dressed according to the official code: black slacks, black socks and black shoes; white shirts and official FFA ties; and the official FFA blue corduroy jacket, neatly zipped to the top.

The boys ducked outside to warm up, out of earshot of their competitors. As the harmonic sounds of strings and vocals drifted into the morning air, it was clear these young men flat-out excelled at music.

Yes, they wanted to win the state title and continue to the National FFA competition in Louisville in the fall. But as their stage time approached, these consummate performers also knew they were looking >>

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