

Daily production power

Routines generate impressive daily production and earn Gloucestershire herd a top award

The winner of the first Chris May Memorial Trophy for the herd with the highest lifetime daily yield was Chris Simmons from south Gloucestershire. CowManagement finds out a few of his secret management practices that contribute towards his herd's achievement.

A herd average of 19.34kg of milk a day is what earned Chris Simmons the Chris May Memorial Trophy. From all those herds qualifying for the NMR/RABDF Gold Cup this year – nearly 900 in total – his herd had the highest lifetime daily yield (LDY). That's an average of all individual cow LDYs and takes account of production across each day of life – not just days in milk.

Looking a bit deeper into the herd's NMR figures reveals that nearly 50% of cows in Chris' Kingsfoll Holstein herd have LDYs of 20kg or higher – way above the national average.

Despite herd expansion – cow numbers are now 280 and on their way up to 300 – and diversification into retailing, cow

health and welfare remain the priority for Chris and his father Lionel and their team of four staff, plus Chris' mother who looks after the calves.

Calving all year round, cows are milked three times a day and average 11,500kg. Milk quality is kept on track at 3.7% fat and 3.15% protein, but increasing constituents is not a priority as their milk is sold on a premium liquid contract to Farmrite and is used for milk sticks (that are used on airlines) – or goes into their own processing business.

"We take about 15% of our milk for bottling and producing cream," says Chris. "We're in our second year now and deliver within a 15-mile radius of the farm, adding locally produced



Chris and Lionel Simmons, winner of the Chris May Memorial Award 2008

vegetables, eggs and bread to our range."

Lucy's Dairy

Managed by Chris' wife Lucy – who has given her name to the farm's dairy products – the couple's marketing message focuses on supplying local milk from healthy, happy and long-living cows.

Chris believes milking three times a day is key. "It keeps cows healthier and it means we see them more frequently. All our staff have job lists, but spotting problems is on everyone's list. I think milking three times adds a lactation to their life."

A closed herd for the past 40 years and by increasing cow numbers from home grown stock, plus strict health and hygiene protocols means that they can adopt a 'no vaccination' policy for key diseases although they do screen regularly. If the slightest trace shows up they carry out individual milk and blood tests.

There are other factors too that Chris cites as vital to the cows' long-term success. One is maintaining intakes. To this end, the cows have access to fresh high quality food from a TMR – which is an 80% maize, 20% grass silage mix with a blend – put out once a day in the mornings so cows go back to fresh feed at peak appetite after milking, then pushed up five times a day. Three rations are mixed – one for high yielders, one



Lucy's Dairy supplies milk and cream from happy healthy cows to local consumers

for the low yielders and another for dry cows and heifers.

And whereas Chris likes the cows to get out onto grass pastures in the summer months, he recognises that the weather must be right. "If it's not, and they're unsettled because they're out in poor weather, then intakes drop and it can take weeks to get them back on track," he adds.

"Cows like routine, so our management evolves around providing this – they're not keen on change."

Cow management is just one part of the LDY story though. "Good lifetime performance starts early – at birth," says Chris. "We keep calves with their mother for two days then move them into pens and feed milk, straw and creep to 12 weeks."

Sunny days

"I like to get the sunshine on their backs so their first summer is spent at grass with supplementary feeding to maintain growth rates. We check their height regularly against a mark on the cattle crush – it's old-fashioned but it works well. We aim to calve them at two years old and this certainly boosts the LDY."

Chris disagrees with extending the interval between calving and serving, but he does admit that it is important to check the condition of the cows. "We start serving at 42 days post calving, but only if the cow's condition score has remained stable – I can't see any point in

holding off." As a result, the Kingsfoll herd has a calving interval of 397 days. And when it comes to choice of sire the Simmons keep it simple. "We don't over-complicate any of the management, but we do focus on breeding for feet, legs and udders – simply making sure the cow can walk into the parlour and milk well."

Six lactations

And keeping cows in the herd – the average number of lactations for this herd is six – means looking after in calf cows. "We place lots of attention on calving cows," says Chris. "We keep these cows in straw pens with their feed in barrels in the pen to make it as easy as possible to feed. Then we check her temperature for three or four days after calving."

And once in the herd, cows settle into their routine and are monitored regularly through milk records. "We watch cell counts carefully and want to keep on our 150,000 cells/ml average with a TBC of less than 20. The NMR

texting service is good – SCC is a universal language so our Lithuanian and Polish workers understand the message and know SCC needs to be 150,000 cells/ml or less – the text goes to them and to me so we can check we're on target."

Conscious that the business needs to develop, Chris is looking to try and centralise the business with youngstock reared closer to home. And maybe more milk will be sold through Lucy's Dairy although the family never underestimates the advantages of the monthly milk cheque from their milk buyer.

However, one thing destined to remain unchanged is the priority given to the cows at Folly Farm. "We involve our vet – who uses InterHerd – and our nutritionist on a regular basis and make sure performance is on target. We want to keep producing plenty of good quality milk from happy, healthy and long-living cows – if the cows are happy, then we are too and so are our customers."

Karen Wright

Kingsfoll cows: maintaining intakes is vital to success



Youngstock: aim is to calve at two years old

