

Eight top performance herds in final NMR/RABDF Gold Cup line-up

Eight in race for Gold Cup

There's no doubt that this year's NMR/RABDF Gold Cup has pulled some of our best herds into the limelight. All have their unique features but there are some common links – scrupulous herd health plans, dedicated workforces and clear goals.

We pick out a few key points on each.

text **Karen Wright**



The Gold Cup winner and runner up will be announced at the Dairy Event and Livestock Show, September 7, NMR stand, 4.30pm.

Messrs Higgins, Wilderley Hall Farm, Pulversbatch, Shrewsbury

Milk production:	12,444kg of milk at 3.72% fat and 3.08% protein with a calving interval of 445 days
Milked:	3x

It's a family affair at Wilderley Hall. Parents Bill and Margaret took on the farm in 1965 and now, with sons Andrew and Bill, run the 245-cow Holstein herd and followers on 145 hectares. This herd is top of NMR's national production league.

"We've invested heavily in the business to improve efficiency and welfare," says Andrew. "We operate a high-input system and maximise the use of the buildings and labour."

There's strong emphasis on providing top quality forage and ensuring the best possible husbandry. They stress that yield is just a happy side effect of having healthy, long lasting cows. More than 2.75 million litres were sold to Wiseman on a Tesco contract last year.



Family affair: Bill, Margaret, Andrew and Bill (jnr) Higgins

Neil Baker, Haselbury Plucknett, Crewkerne, Somerset

Milk production:	10,420kg of milk at 3.99% butterfat and 3.26% protein, with a calving interval of 396 days
Milked	3x

Neil Baker has 830 Holsteins on a 600-hectare unit and sells more than eight million litres of milk each year. A third is used to make 270 tonnes of vintage cheddar on the farm. To help safeguard both milk production and quality, a 'belt and braces' approach is taken to herd health with annual vaccinations and screening.

There's a staff of 17 including four in the cheese room. "It's this team that will allow me to increase herd size to around 1,200," says Neil. He hopes to reach this in 12 months time and be selling around 12 million litres annually.

The unit's 80-point rotary could certainly handle more cows – it takes just 2.5 hours per milking at the moment. Neil says that it would easily milk 3,000 cows, if required.



Neil Baker: "80-point rotary could handle more cows"

Chris Simmons, Kingswood, Wootton-under-Edge, Gloucs

Milk production:	11,446kg of milk at 3.7%fat and 3.27% protein with a calving interval of 403 days
Milked:	3x

A diversification into retailing under the Lucy's dairy brand – with Chris's wife Lucy – has not distracted the Simmons family from expanding their high performance herd of 282 cows and followers. The aim is to build up the Holstein herd to 350 cows.

Chris believes milking three times a day is key to his herd's management. "It keeps cows healthier and it means we see them more frequently," says Chris. The Kingsfoll herd has been mainly closed for the past 40 years with any bought in stock blood tested before joining the herd. This, along with strict health and hygiene protocols means that they can adopt a 'no vaccination' policy for key diseases although they do screen regularly.



Chris Simmons: "'No vaccination' policy for key diseases"

James Burrow, Barton, Preston, Lancs

Milk production:	9,786kg of milk at 4.09% butterfat and 3.28% protein with a calving interval of 389 days
Milked	2x

James' parents sold all but 20 cows in 2006 and James and his wife Krisha took on the 115 hectare tenancy and have been building up numbers ever since. The Stardale herd now numbers 215 Holsteins and youngstock.

The herd is run on a traditional summer grazing system, with all the cows turned out in April and re-housed at the end of October, weather permitting. Simplicity is one of the vital ingredients for success of this unit. "It's just me, my full-time herdsman Matt, and my father Bob, so there's a lot to do to keep the herd in good health, fertile and producing well," says James. "And complicated management can be an obstacle to achieving all those things."

Milk is sold to Tesco, via Arla.



Matt Green and James Burrow: "There's a lot to do to keep on track"

Mary Mead, Holt Farms, Blagdon, Bristol

Milk production:	7,764kg of milk at 4.08% fat and 3.32% protein with a calving interval of 385 days
Milked:	2x

The Lakemead Friesian herd of 400 cows and followers went into organic production in 2007 – a move that has suited good grass growing conditions and the breed of cattle. These cows are producing high yields from forage.

The herd has been closed for two decades with all replacements home bred. And the breeding policy has played a very large part in the herd's success – an area that Mary takes complete charge of. "We have stuck to our guns as far as breeding goals are concerned," says Mary. "And I believe this is paying off. We breed 'farmer friendly' cows that are sustainable and have a good balance of production plus strong feet and good fertility."

Milk is sold to Yeo Valley.



Mary Mead: "We stuck to our guns with breeding goals"

King Family, Martinstown, Dorchester, Dorset

Milk production:	11,386kg of milk at 3.95% fat and 2.95% protein with a calving interval of 403 days
Milked:	3x

Calving year round and producing as much milk as possible on the limited acreage supports level milk production year round for Tom King who runs the 260-cow Vortex herd of Holsteins with his father Alan.

Three years ago Tom moved to three times a day milking and saw yields increase by 1,500kg in just 12 months and they have continued to rise.

But it's not all down to the extra milking. Feeding a consistent ration also plays a key role – any area that his brother Charlie assists with.

“We're fine tuning all the time and removing some of the barriers to efficiency that inconsistency can create.”



Tom and Charlie King: “A consistent ration is important”

Barry Coombes, Blackford, Wedmore, Somerset

Milk production:	10,700kg of milk at 4.03% fat and 3.07% protein with a calving interval of 408 days
Milked:	2x

Barry Coombes and his sons Jack and Sam moved to New Grove Farm seven years ago and have reseeded nearly all the grassland and installed a new milking parlour. At the same time cow numbers have doubled to the current 195 Holstein cows plus Barry's 12 Ayrshires.

While Barry concentrates on the herd's breeding and milking duties, Jack rears the calves and looks after registrations. Sam is in charge of mechanics and field work. Nearly half the milk comes from forage and they are aiming to increase this.

“I don't believe in pushing any individual,” says Barry, who believes that success lies in individual cow management, regardless of herd size.”



Barry, Sam and Jack Coombes: “Drive for more milk from forage”

Mike and Chris King, Iron Acton, Bristol

Milk production:	9,843kg of milk at 3.85% fat and 3.15% protein with a calving interval of 420 days
Milked:	2x

Brothers Mike and Chris King have built up the dairy herd from 47 cows on 49 hectares in 1990 to its current 560 Holsteins – with 314 cows in the milking herd – and a total of 405 hectares which includes 182 hectares of arable crops. They are just completing a £98k investment in improved housing and new slurry handling facilities.

“We have sold our milk to Farmright since it started in 2000 and we are very involved in producing milk for its niche markets,” says Michael.

They aim to achieve high performance from healthy, stress-free cows and with a replacement rate of only 11% this appears to be met – thanks to the meticulous detail that herd manager Martyn Smith and his team adhere to.



The King team takes the credit for the herd's progress, from left to right: Tim Hamiltin Newbolt, Martyn and Lyn Smith, Nigel Mills and Yecheniy Vil'nyy