



Winning team: Lyn Smith, Martyn Smith, Chris and Michael King, Tim Newbolt and vet Will Tully

Michael and Chris King

Cows are the most important asset at the brothers' Iron Acton-based unit. And they work closely with their dedicated team to maximise health, welfare and milk production



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|-------------------------|-----------------|
| Number of milking cows: | 314 |
| Average milk yield: | 9,894kg |
| Somatic cell count: | 184,000cells/ml |
| Farm size: | 405 hectares |

Focused approach and team work leads to Gold Cup win

Crowning glory for King's herd

We find out more about the Bristol-based herd that struck gold at this year's Dairy Event and joins the prestigious list of the UK's top dairy herds.

text Rachael Porter and Karen Wright

Kingspool Holsteins, run by Michael and Chris King, has scooped this year's NMR/RABDF Gold Cup. And Chris says that he, Michael and the team who run the business are still overwhelmed by their success.

"Winning the Gold Cup has been one of our long-term objectives, but we didn't expect to achieve it with our second attempt. We'd only ever entered once before, in 2008. And although making the final eight meant we were in with a chance, we didn't honestly think that 2010 would be our year," he says.

But it seems that 2010 was and is the year for the fourth generation to run the herd at Two Pools Farm, in Iron Acton near Bristol. And their win is just reward for two decades of hard work. Michael and

Chris have made significant changes at the unit during the past 20 years. They 'reinstated' the dairy herd in 1990 and expanded it very gradually from 47 cows on 49 hectares to today's 560 Holsteins – with 314 cows in the milking herd – and a total of 405 hectares, which includes 182 hectares of arable crops.

Large investment

Confidence in the dairy industry has fuelled the Kings more recent expansion in the dairy unit – during the past four years cow numbers have increased by about 25% and they are just completing a £98k investment in improved housing and new slurry handling facilities.

"We have sold our milk to Farmright since the company started in 2000 and we

are very involved in producing milk for its niche markets," says Michael, who shares the running of the farm estate, which also includes a business park and a vinegar production company, with his brother Chris. "We're also involved with some trial work in functional milk products, but the bottom line is that our milk must be top quality with low cell counts and produced from a high welfare system."

To this end the Kings and their team, which includes husband-and-wife Martyn and Lyn Smith, value the cows as their most important asset. Production has gradually increased to an average of 9,843kg of milk at 3.85% fat and 3.15% protein with an average cell count of 184,000cells/ml. This is achieved from a modern yet unpressurised system.

"We milk twice a day and cows are fed a flat rate TMR that's based on grass and maize silage," adds Michael. "High yielders and heifers are housed all year round with minimal diet changes to reduce any stress."

The philosophy on this farm is to achieve high performance from healthy, stress-free cows and with a replacement rate of only 11% this appears to be exactly what the brothers are doing. Michael admits that a lot of the progress that they have made during the past few years – and he considers progress to be in cow health, welfare and longevity as well as production – is down to the meticulous detail with which Martyn and his team manage the herd.

Cow welfare

"We have few metabolic disease problems, cell counts are kept well under control

and cow welfare is top of the agenda. We also use a Stepmatrix weight platform that cows walk across as they leave the parlour. It detects the slightest change in locomotion before it can be detected by the human eye and has reduced our incidence of lameness by more than 50% and paid for itself in 15 months," says Michael.

"The perception that running larger herds jeopardises cow health and welfare is a threat to our industry and we can demonstrate very clearly that the reverse is the case here. We can also show the benefits of mixed farming and demonstrate how we manage the soil on a three-year rotation of grass, maize and cereals. We use cattle slurry and chicken manure, from a local poultry unit, and this reduces our use of artificial fertiliser to 100 tonnes for the whole farm."

Social environment

The NMR/RABDF Gold Cup is open to all milk recorded herds meeting the competition criteria of more than 100 milking animals, an annual somatic cell count average of 200,000/ml, or less than 400,000 for organic herds, and a minimum EPLI value specific to the breed. For Holsteins this is a PLI of £20.

Stepmatrix: a platform detects any changes in locomotion and aids lameness control

And Kingspool Holsteins, along with the other seven finalists, were visited by this year's judges: David Cotton, Chairman RABDF, Philip Kirkham, Chairman NMR and Ian Macalpine, 2007 Gold Cup winner.

"We all worked hard to ensure that the herd and the unit were the very best they could be on the day and there was an anxious wait for the results," says Chris, adding that, since their win, staff moral is now at an all-time high.

By way of saying 'thank you' and 'well done', the Kings also hosted a celebratory meal – venison shot on the farm – for the team. "We like to think that this is a good place to work – it's a happy and social environment. And it's a particularly happy place to be at the moment – we're all still riding high."

Looking ahead, Chris and Michael want to keep developing the business and take advantage of the opportunities that the dairy industry presents. "After many years of building up the herd, we feel we have a solid base with the management in place for a fit and healthy herd that can perform well as we move ahead." |



New housing: the Kings have recently invested in buildings at Two Pools Farm



Winning line up: cows are milked twice a day and the herd average yield stands at 9,843kg

