

Mystic Valley

Although it is only 11 years old, Mitch Breunig would really like his cow house to be completely rebuilt. It offers poor cow comfort due to the lack of space at the feed fence.



Cows:	420 head
Young stock:	450 head
Hectares:	365
Production (kg):	13,240 milk (3.6%bf 3.0%pr)



Mitch Breunig



The passageways are too narrow

“From a cow-comfort point of view, a six-row stall isn’t suitable for high-production dairy cattle,” says Mitch Breunig

Out of his comfort zone

Mystic Valley, the American farm where bulls Jenny Lou and Toystory were born, is far more than an attractive gene pool. Good nutrition and optimised cow comfort are central to the running of the business. “I would rather have 84 good cubicles than 100 bad ones,” says owner Mitch Breunig.

text **Jaap van der Knaap**

If the bank would allow me blow up my barn I’d get some dynamite today, blow it up and put a completely different building in its place.”

This is a remarkable thing to say about a barn that is only 11 years old, but producer Mitch Breunig of Sauk City, Wisconsin, is serious.

“At the moment I am working with a 2x3-row free stall, but from the point of view of comfort it really isn’t suitable for high-production dairy cattle. Now I would opt for a 2+2-row stall. This stall is less compact and so it’s more expensive, but the extra length means that there is space for every cow at the feeding fence. Having enough space at the feed bunk is one of the most important factors for cow comfort.”

Cubicle length

Until 11 years ago, Mitch milked in a tie-stall barn. He opted for a new building in order to lighten the workload and expand the farm.

“As a dairy farmer, you often forget to come out of your comfort zone,” he says,

continuing his story about the design of the barn. “You build the barn your own consultant recommends and you use the same building contractor as your neighbours. It is too easy to get your advice.”

The consultants advised Mitch to build a six-row barn and to keep the width of the cubicles at 1.2m. “By doing this you can house a lot of cows per square metre and that is financially attractive.” Mitch opted for sand in the cubicles, he says that without sand he would have gone bankrupt long ago, but four years after commissioning the barn it was not going as he had expected.

“Cows weren’t maturing well – I had a high replacement percentage. After two or three lactations the cows seemed tired, they were finished and I had to cull them. And I just didn’t know why.”

It was after Nigel Cook of the UW-Madison Vet School did a study on how long cows lie down for that Mitch saw the solution. “In his study, in stalls that were built big enough for the cow with sand bedding, the lying times were very

good and lameness was not an issue. Reflecting on our construction planning we should have travelled further from our own area to see what was working in other areas of the country.”

Mitch subsequently increased the size of the cubicles for his group of older cows to 1.3m. The length of the stalls of the barn increased from 2.5 to 2.9 inches. This meant a 16% reduction in the number of cubicles, but there was an immediate improvement in the health of the cows.

“The business immediately took off, the cows were lying down more, the herd was more peaceful and production rose. “The bank has been amazed at our lower cull rate and our ability to market excess cattle to other farms, which has numbered between 50 and 70 on a yearly basis.

“Our current production record proves that it’s better to work with 84 good free cubicles than with 100 poor ones.”

Genomic bulls

The 350 cows are now achieving a high annual average with 13,240kg of milk, at 3.6% fat and 3.0% protein.

Mitch christened his new operation ‘Mystic Valley’. For the pedigree names of the cows he still uses the name Jenny-Lou – from his father Louis and his mother Jeannette. This is a name with clout, thanks to the success as breeding bulls of full brothers Jenny-Lou Marshall P 149 (daughter of Lou) and Jenny-Lou Marshall Toystory. Jenny-Lou Patron Toyane, dam of Toystory and Lou, is still there, a dry cow and now 12 years old.



A Shottle daughter, out of the Toyane family, about to calve



Cubicles are bedded with sand



Maize is ensiled in 'sausage-shaped' bales to maximise quality

“This cow family still earns a great deal of respect due to Toystory and Lou,” says Mitch, who owns daughters of Picston Shottle (out of a full sister of Toystory) who are highly sought-after by various AI organisations. The AI organisation CRV has recently bought a Shottle son out of a Titanic daughter of Toyane. Mitch himself has made full use of both sons of Toyane. There are 51 daughters of Toystory and 61 daughters of Lou in the stall.

“Toystory is a bull who breeds consistently and produces fine milkers; Lou is not as consistent, but gives you a much greater chance of breeding a cow that’s eligible for showing. Both of the bulls are siring some of the best first-lactation cows on the farm.”

The insemination list in recent years has not been that long, featuring Damion, Laurin, Planet and Alexander, but has recently expanded with the addition of a large group of genomic bulls.

“A number of animals from the Toyane family have high genetic markers. Because I myself have also had very good results with this family, I trust the genomic selection technology. If we don’t follow it our genetics will fall behind those who are”

Farm management

Despite the recognition gained from breeding, Mitch believes overall farm management is much more important in terms of good results – particularly in times of low milk prices.

“Sand in the cubicles helps to achieve a low somatic cell count. In September our average cell count was 87,000cell/ml. But that’s also due to good communication with the milkers and a balanced ration.” In the ration the ratio between maize silage and lucerne silage is 50:50.

“I would prefer to give them more maize silage, but because of the hilly countryside we have to grow lucerne to conserve the soil,” explains Mitch.

Yet the various plastic sausage-shaped bales of maize, with a total length of 600m, are impressive.

“The quality of the maize stored in this way is maximised, to the very last metre. Maximum feed quality and optimised supply is fundamental to high milk production,” he adds. |



Heavy traffic: a busy feed fence at Mystic Valley