

**Mary Mead**

Her British Friesian herd gave the Holstein herds in this year's NMR/RABDF Gold Cup competition.



Number of cows:	400
Average yield:	7,764kg
Somatic cell count:	136,000 cells/ml
Calving interval:	385 days

Somerset-based milk producer and British Friesian breeder, Mary Mead from Holt Farms in Blagdon, scooped the NMR Silver Salver in this year's NMR/RABDF Gold Cup competition and no one was more pleasantly surprised than Mary herself.

"We've qualified to enter the competition for the past five years, but never entered before. But this year I thought, why not. Quite a few people urged me to enter, so I set aside some time to fill out the competition form and now I'm rather glad that I did!" she says.

Organically farmed since 2007, the pedigree Lakemead British Friesian herd of 400 cows and 360 young stock including beef-cross animals, is split across two units. While both are good grass growing farms, one is 275m above sea level and the other just 60m above. "Winters are long here and it can be very wet," says Mary, who maintains one set of milk records for the whole herd but keeps the two units – and the young stock unit – as separate cost centres.

The Lakemead herd average production for the year ending September 2009 is 7,764kg at 4.08% fat and 3.32% protein with an average cell count of 136,000 cells/ml. The calving interval is 385 days and the herd's PLI is £81. These performance figures are well above the breed average. Milk is sold to Yeovil Valley.

"We have a separate young stock rearing

Forage machines: British Friesians have very good feed conversion efficiency

Silver award for 'traditional' herd that boasts plenty of production efficiency

Best of British

British Friesians made their mark in this year's NMR/RABDF Gold Cup competition. We spoke to the NMR Silver Salver award winner, who tells us why the breed suits her system and why there's renewed interest in the breed among UK producers.

text **Rachael Porter**

unit and heifers are allocated back to meet either unit's requirement for heifers. So there's no favouritism with genetics. The bottom third of the herd is

bred to a Simmental, Aberdeen Angus or Hereford beef bull."

Breeding – or rather the British Friesian breed – is one of Mary's passions. Next



year marks the fiftieth anniversary for the breed at Holt Farms and Mary thinks the year could also mark a turning point for the breed that many producers have shunned in favour of the Holstein.

Fantastic figures

Breed data shows that the British Friesian beats the Holstein on somatic cell count, butterfat and protein percentage, body condition score and fertility. The latter is the 'crunch' figure for many producers who are either converting back to 100% British Friesian or using sires for one or two generations in a bid to improve fertility. The CDI calving interval for the British Friesian is 30 days lower than that for the Holstein – 405 days compared to 432 days.

"And there's a nine-point difference in the breed's fertility index, compared to the Holstein. No wonder semen sales are up yet again year on year, a trend that started about four years ago. We're starting to see a resurgence in interest,"



Winning team: Jon Wilson, Steve Laurie, Richard Searle and Mark Brimecombe

says Mary, who says that low vet and AI costs are another bonus for Friesians.

The herd has been closed for two decades with all replacements home bred. And the thorough 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. It's no good having lifespan without production – our cows have always had to make money to allow us to invest in the development of the business."

Mary has always made it her job to analyse each cow's performance and made sure that any type and production faults are corrected through breeding. "I have bred from a background of performance, longevity and always looked to correct any weaker areas."

Foraging ability

And the Lakemead cows have proved their foraging ability in the conversion to organic. "We did see a drop in production as cows moved to higher forage based diets – 60% of their dry matter intake has to come from forage. But they have pulled back to pre organic production levels now.

"We're milking trouble-free cows that last for a long time in our herd and that's just one of the reasons I can afford to be choosy about which ones I breed replacements from.

The breed suits our system – the cows are forage machines on shorter legs with very good feed conversion efficiency.

But it's not just production and longevity that makes the British Friesian particularly attractive here. "It's the whole package – our male calves, crossbreds and cull cows attract good prices. And we sell about 10 carefully selected dairy bulls a year to private herds and into AI.

"Our cows are very adaptable – if we need

to keep them in during prolonged wet weather to protect the pastures, or if it's extremely hot, we can do so without upsetting them," says Mary.

It's this flexibility and drive for sustainability that lies at the core of the business.

"We are currently looking to reduce input costs and adopt energy saving measures, for example through growing miscanthus and, by moving to organic, to eliminate artificial fertiliser and pesticide inputs.

"We have a policy of continuous investment from income we have generated from the business so we will keep looking forward and adapting to changing circumstances."

Healthy competition

While in production and performance terms there's little difference between the two units the internal costings do provide benchmarks within and between the units. "We can pick up trends and any blips very easily and it creates some healthy competition."

Looking forward, Mary says that the herd's Gold Cup success has not only motivated staff and raised the profile of the herd, but has also helped to add momentum to the renewed interest in the breed.

And she believes that there's much more to come.

"Many producers are still yield obsessed and would see using British Friesian semen as a step backwards for their herds. But they're pleasantly surprised when they take a look at British Friesian yields – particularly butterfat and protein – and many are waking up to the fact that there's more to making a profit than just producing a lot of white water.

"It's about productivity and efficiency and the cost of feed per litre – not just yield.

"Yield at any price is not, as many producers are finding out to their own cost, necessarily the route to a successful, sustainable and profitable dairy business." |