

The King family

A proactive approach to herd health, targeted breeding and precision feeding, and investing for the future. All factors that impressed this year's Gold Cup judges.



Number of cows:	300
Annual milk sales:	> 3,000,000 litres
Unit size:	120 hectares
Average milk yield:	12,125kg



Superb staff: it's all about having a skilled and dedicated team



Consistency is key: a uniform herd fed a precise and balanced ration



Pit and polish: milker Mike Ball in the unit's spotless and newly extended parlour



Balanced diet: brother Charlie formulates the herd's ration and sources feeds

Dorset-based herd succeeds with third bid for gold

Vortex victory

This year's NMR/RABDF Gold Cup winning herd wowed the judges and is set to impress visitors next year when the unit hosts an open day. We caught up with the business' surprised and delighted owner to find out more about the herd.

text **Rachael Porter**

Third time lucky? "I guess it was," says Tom King, whose Dorset-based dairy herd scooped the industry's most prestigious title – the NMR/RABDF Gold Cup – at this year's Dairy Event. The King family's unit beat five other finalists and no one was more surprised than Tom. "I really didn't expect them to read out our name – I honestly thought that the winner was notified before the award ceremony. So I assumed we'd not won," he says. His surprised turned to delight: "It's always been an ambition to win the Gold Cup and now that we have, it's all a bit surreal really. And exciting. It's the ultimate recognition for us all – the family and our dedicated team of staff – and reward for our hard work."

Dedicated team

This year's panel of judges visited the King's 300-strong pedigree Holstein Vortex herd, which is based at Martinstown near Dorchester, in July. And they saw for themselves how Tom and his family, and their dedicated team of staff, get the best from their herd. More than three million litres of milk are

sold each year to Dairy Crest on a Sainsbury's Dairy Development Group (SDDG) liquid contract.

Tom King is the fourth generation at Church Farm and runs the 120-hectare unit with his father Alan. Since returning from Sparsholt College 11 years ago Tom has gradually taken more responsibility for the herd and has undertaken an expansion programme, more than doubling the milking herd to its current size, with 250-head of youngstock.

In order to keep more cows the Kings have converted two existing silage barns into cubicle sheds and built a new feed yard. Also they recently extended and upgraded the existing 16:16 herringbone parlour – it's now an 18:18 with auto ID, ADF and pedometers to aid heat detection. "We have automated the parlour as much as we can to reduce milking time without compromising the milking routine, which could impact on udder health and milk quality," says Tom.

Like many producers, achieving the best possible milk price is a key objective for the Kings. Calving year round and producing as much milk as possible on the limited acreage supports level milk production year round. Coinciding with

an increase in milk prices and the launch of the Sainsbury's contract nearly four years ago, Tom decided to change from twice-a-day milking to three times. "This made a massive impact on yields," adds Tom. "Average yield increased by 1,500kg in just 12 months and it has continued to increase to today's average of 12,125kg at 3.64% butterfat and 3.06% protein." But it's not all down to the extra milking. Tom says that feeding a consistent ration also has a key role to play, as does attention to detail with day-to-day herd management.

"We're fine tuning all the time. We're not making big changes to the diet or any other areas of management. But we're removing some of the barriers to efficiency milk production that inconsistency can create."

Replacement rate

Aside from increased milk yields, this has had another positive side effect – fewer cull cows. "The average age of the herd has increased during the past two years and our replacement rate is down to around 16%," says Tom. "This means that we have been able to expand at a faster rate."

Herd size does indeed continue to grow using home-reared heifers. The past year has seen cow number rise by 45 head and the Kings plan to continue to push milking cow numbers up past the 300-cow mark. And there's to be no let up on ensuring that fertility and longevity are first class. The King's herd's lifetime daily yield is an impressive 14.36kg a day, indicating that it has good fertility and staying-power.

This all starts with bull selection, according to Tom. "We're hot on health traits – they're key to breeding cows that will last for several lactations," he says. "We screen all bulls for fitness traits and take out any that are negative for herd life and fertility and positive for

cell count," he explains. "This leaves a shortlist of mainly higher index bulls. We want hassle-free cows that produce at least 50 tonnes of milk – a minimum requirement for her to pay for herself." The herd is run as one group and fed on a TMR based on maize, grass and lucerne silage. This supports maintenance plus 37 litres. With the help of his brother Charlie, a nutritionist, the feeding has been changed during the past four years with the introduction of a mixer wagon. Charlie formulates the rations and sources the feeds.

Fertility management sees herdsman, Mike Ball, working closely with the herd's vet, Sally Wilson, to pick up any

Staying power: Tom strives to breed cows that will last for several lactations

problems. "We've been more aggressive with fertility during the past 12 months and have been serving cows a little earlier than we were before so our average days to first service for the herd is about 68 days," explains Tom.

Proactive approach

With a growing herd, he says it's vital to keep on top of fertility and take a proactive approach, rather than wait for problems to arise. "By then so much 'damage' has been done. It's important to continually focus on reducing our 397-day calving interval."

The Kings also take a proactive approach to herd health. Cows are vaccinated for

BVD, Lepto, IBR and BVT8 and blood samples are tested regularly for Johne's. Working closely with other members of the SDDG, lameness, mastitis and any incidences of metabolic disorders are benchmarked so necessary improvements can be made.

"And we're always striving to improve what we're doing and we're open to new ideas and the possibility of investment," adds Tom. "We do have plans to continue to expand – possibly to as many as 600 head in six years time. But for now we'll consolidate what we have.

"We're focusing on ensuring that we run a tight and consistent ship in order to maximise cow performance." |

