



#### The Sanders family

Feed and milk price pressures led to a change in breeding strategy on the family's renowned Holstein unit. The resulting cross-bred cows suit their system.



Herd size:	450
100-tonne cows:	83
Cross-bred milkers:	70
Annual average yield:	8,100kg per cow

A different approach – but continued success – for past Gold Cup winning herd

## The very best of both worlds

Snap Sue and Andrew Sanders in two and you'd find the word 'Holstein' running through them. So why, 10 years after their pedigree herd won the NMR/RABDF Gold Cup, are they now cross breeding? We spoke to them to find out more.

text **Rachael Porter**

**F**ew producers and breeders are bigger fans of the Holstein than Andrew and Sue Sanders. Their 450-cow pedigree Sandisfarne herd,

which they run in partnership with sons Julian and Mattwheew at Ballalough near Douglas on the Isle of Man, is world renowned and freshly calved heifers are

sold to producers in the UK and across Europe.

The family will always be known and respected for its Holstein breeding, but

*Cross-bred calves: tomorrow's milkers are smaller and more robust than their black-and-white predecessors*









crosses are registered as pedigree with the Ayrshire Cattle Society and the family are so pleased with them that this year they're stepping up their cross breeding efforts and using Swedish Red semen on some of their best Holstein cows.

"We have 70 cross-bred milkers in the herd at the moment and the plan is to up this over the next few years to around 225 – around 50% of the herd," says Andrew, adding that they're using Montbeliarde sires for the second cross. The third cross is back to Holstein to produce a 'procross' cow, which has been so successful in California.

He says that the Swedish Red offers exceptional fertility, hard and black feet, mastitis resistance and also reduces the overall size of the cow.

"Our Holsteins had grown to 750kg

or more – that's typical of most Holsteins nowadays. The Swedish Red is helping to reduce that back down to around 650kg." The Montbeliardes bring power to the party, as well as strength, forage efficiency and milk quality. The resulting cull cows and bull calves are fantastic, according to Andrew, and sell well at market. "I've not seen prices like that for a while."

### Two routes

"Moving back to Holstein for the third cross puts milk yield back into the animal and also keeps the udders in good order," Andrew says. "They add style and ensure that we still have a cow that will milk and can be milked easily for at least six lactations."

The family is well on its way to converting the herd to a mixture of both pure Holstein and cross-bred cows that are

stronger, smaller and more robust. "We're looking for good commercial cows, so in a way nothing has changed there. It's just that what constitutes a commercial cow has changed. And we're taking two different routes to get there – the fast and the slow."

Andrew says that they're in a unique position, with such a large herd, to be able to take two routes. "We can have our cake and eat it, in a way. We can keep our best Holsteins, retain a pure nucleus and continue with our passion and belief in the breed. And we can also take the cross breeding tack, which we also see huge merit in and are already reaping the rewards associated with that."

As far as sire selection goes for the two sectors of the herd, Holstein bulls are selected from all over the world. "I reckon there are only about four or five bulls in the world at the moment that will do what we want to do. OMan was the big eye opener for us. He offers so much strength and longevity and his fourth calvers in our herd are looking great. Ramos is a bull that also has what we're looking for.

"Basically we steer clear of anything that's too extreme and we look for sires with an angularity that is thicker than average. We're also looking for between 0.5 and 0.7 for lifespan to increase longevity and +6 for fertility, as well as a negative score for mastitis and very good udders."

### Sire selection

Swedish Red semen from Scandinavia is selected by Julian. And only the top Montbeliarde bulls from France are used for the second cross.

"We're very choosy about the sires we use – we have to be if we're to make the progress we want to make."

But does it feel odd, deviating from pure Holstein breeding after so long? Are he and Sue reconciled with the changes they've made? "I am, now I can see the benefits. Sue's less enthusiastic, but that's good. Her passion will ensure that our Holsteins stay on top too.

"We're finding that it's less stressful and time consuming to look after more robust cows – they are better at looking after themselves – and the switch away from three-times-a-day milking has also been a relief.

"Ultimately, I'm really enjoying the challenge of something new, with an eye on succession, and building a herd for the future – cows that my sons will continue to breed, milk, sell and manage successfully for decades to come." |

*Heifer accommodation: 140 youngstock are housed in a new polytunnel building*

