**Mark Verity**
This dairy set up makes the best use of its resources by breeding cattle to suit the land and calving to make the most of grass and maximise production.

Clitheroe

| Herd size: | 355 |
| --- | --- |
| Rainfall: | 1,750mm |
| Cow tracks: | More than 2.5 miles |

Award-winning herd takes hilly terrain, and a lot of rain, in its stride and makes the most of grazing

# The height of success

One Lancashire-based producer has been recognised for his ability to turn the challenges of managing a dairy herd at 1,000 feet above sea level into opportunities.

text **Rachael Porter**

It's been quite a year for Mark Verity and the team at Radholme Laund, in Lancashire. Not only was the unit's 355-cow herd shortlisted for the NMR/RABDF Gold Cup, but it was also 'highly commended' for its fertility performance at this year's Cream Awards.

"It's always great to get recognition for a job well done – particularly when it's from your industry peers," says Mark, a second-generation producer who farms in partnership with his parents Stuart and Kathleen near Clitheroe.

His achievements – both in terms of day-to-day management and glittering award ceremonies – are all the more remarkable when you consider the less-than-ideal conditions where he runs the predominantly Friesian herd.

"To say it's quite challenging here is an understatement – parts of the farm are more than 1,000 feet above sea level. But we also have some advantages. High rainfall – at least 1,750mm – means that we usually have plenty of grass to graze when other more southerly and lower lying units have 'dried up'."

## Hoof health

Indeed, Mark's ability to turn a challenge into an opportunity and to make the most of what he has is, undoubtedly, a key factor behind the herd's success. Topography is certainly not holding the business back. The whole dairy system is geared up to make the most of late spring and summer grazing.

This includes the type of cow bred to graze the difficult terrain, through to the provision of more than 2.5 miles of well-maintained cow tracks to ensure that the herd can access grazing easily and without compromising hoof health. "A cow is only as good as her feet. If she can't walk to and from grazing, she can't graze, she can't produce milk and she can't get in calf. So yes, we do make looking after our cows' feet a top priority here," he explains. Cow tracks were first laid more than 10 years ago, first using hard core and then rubber matting (old conveyor belts) was used. "But these have proved a little slippery in wet weather, so we're in the process of 'up grading' using second-hand AstroTurf – some of it is from one of Burnley FC's pitches.

"We heard about someone who'd used it



*Cross-bred herd: youngstock thriving on the hilly Lancashire-based unit*

and thought we'd give it a go. And so far, so good. It drains well, it's clean and it's not slippery. I imagine that, for the cows, it's a bit like walking on pasture."

He and herdsman Garry Cocks pay close attention to cows' feet and every month they mobility score the herd. This is done on a scale of zero to three, where zero is 'very good' and three is 'very lame'.

"Any cow scored as 'two' is immediately checked for lameness and to ensure rapid intervention both Garry and I are trained in foot trimming," explains Mark. "We very rarely see a cow with a score of three – we work hard to prevent that."

## Grazing management

Staying on top of hoof health means that cows are well equipped to utilise every blade of grass come turn out, which is usually at the end of March. "It's just too wet before then. But once it is dry enough under foot, there's plenty of grass to be had," says Mark, who goes out with a plate meter once a week during the grazing season.

"We use a rotational grazing system and make sure there's enough grass – but not too much – ahead of them at all times. It's quite a balancing act, but it pays off."

Cows are brought back into winter housing – and a partial mixed ration – as they calve. This starts in late September and continues through until March.

Dry cows and lower yielding late lactation cows stay outside until late October, depending on the weather. We generally bring them in as conditions get wetter as we want to avoid poaching the land."

## Minimising fluctuations

Nutrition plays a key role in maximising both production and fertility and Mark works closely with nutritionist Duncan Rose.

"He visits regularly to evaluate the diet and make any 'tweaks' that are required. We pay close attention to condition score, ensuring that they don't lose too much in early lactation or gain too much later on.

"Minimising fluctuations in condition score is key to safeguarding fertility. We don't want to push the cows too hard. Our goal is good fertility and not just to maximise milk yield at the expense of that."

Mark selects bulls very much on their fertility as block calving is vital to the success of his management system. And he has achieved good performance here

with a calving interval of 383 days and a percentage in calf at 100 days of 55%. "I also look at sires' locomotion scores, as well as fat and protein. I sell to Arla, on a Tesco contract, so milk quality is important too," he explains, adding that the herd is currently averaging 8,100 litres at 4.27% butterfat and 3.40% protein.

The predominantly Friesian herd also comprises some Jersey and Swedish Red crosses. "All these breeds are better suited to grazing – particularly here on our more challenging terrain. And I like to use Jersey sires on our heifers as they're easier to calve. "The herd has become a little mixed, more by accident than design. But it's working well for us. I'm not sure that a Holstein would even manage to get to the top of some of our hills!"

Breeding home-bred replacements will continue as Mark and his family are looking to increase herd size. "But with a close eye on management, so that we continue to look after the cows as well as we possibly can," he stresses. "Expansion will not be at the expense of fertility or hoof health, for example. Standards have to be maintained. So we're consolidating at the moment." |