

**Neil Baker**

Always looking for the next challenge and striving to continually improve is what drives Neil. And now he can knock winning the Gold Cup off his 'to do' list.



Herd size:	<b>1,800</b>
Unit size:	<b>692 hectares</b>
Average yield:	<b>11,000 litres sold</b>
Calving index:	<b>382 days</b>

After an impressive 'hat trick' of finals, this Somerset-based herd finally takes the top spot

# All eyes on the top dairy prize

Staying power and an eye on the future were just two factors that impressed this year's NMR/RABDF Gold Cup judging panel when they visited Neil Baker's unit. We find out more about this award-winning herd and his plans for the future.

text **Olivia Cooper & Rachael Porter**

**W**hen Neil Baker creates a business plan, he sticks to it. And this tenacity has not only paid off in terms of productivity and profitability. It's also seen him lift this year's NMR/RABDF Gold Cup, having been a finalist in the competition an impressive three times. "I thought I'd be in the top three and I really thought that this year's runner up

– Brian Yates from East Logan – would win it, to be honest. So it was a huge surprise when our name was called out and I was absolutely stunned and thrilled," he says, adding that it took a while for the news to sink in.

For many other people, who are familiar with Neil's herd and business, his win was less of a surprise. It's a fantastic dairy set up and the judging panel were particularly impressed with changes that he has made to the unit during the past few years.

He's continually striving to improve

things, do things better and keep the business moving forward.

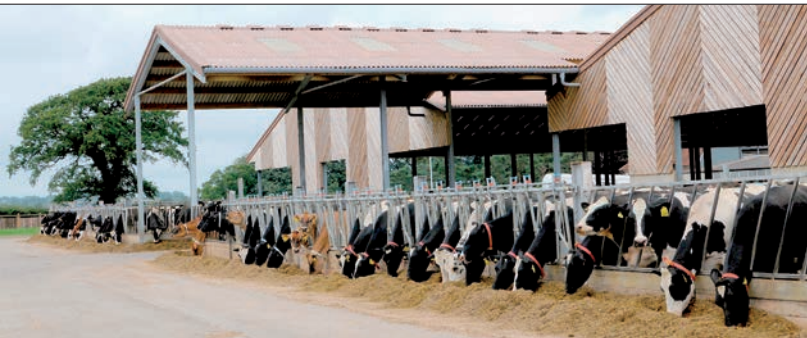
"Neil examines every aspect and every cost of the business. His sheer determination to tackle herd health issues is impressive and he works tirelessly to get the best from his staff, with training and protocols in place," said RABDF chairman and Gold Cup judge, Ian Macalpine. "The judges' decision to award him the Gold Cup was unanimous."

## Herd expansion

In 2014 Neil said he was planning to increase herd size, boost milk yields and improve herd health, mastitis and fertility. And he has certainly delivered.







*Herd expansion: milkers now number 1,800 cows*



*Cow comfort: the herd is housed on deep, sand-bedded cubicles*



*Rotary parlour: a full teat-prep routine is followed at every milking*



*Calf unit: investment has reduced heifer age at first calving*

The family-owned Rushywood Farm at Haselbury Plucknett, Somerset, now extends to 692ha, with the herd size rising by 520 head during the past year, to 1,800 cows. With 55% of the herd being heifers, yields are currently running at just above 11,000 litres sold.

“Our business strategy is to broadly follow what our family has been doing for the past four generations,” says Neil. “This is to care for our cattle as best we can so they produce high yields at low costs, and so that we can invest in people, facilities and further expansion.”

All the cows are housed on deep-bedded sand cubicles all year round, with the exception of in-calf heifers. “We calve the heifers at 23 months old, and I just can’t get them big enough to serve at 12 months old if they’re grazing,” he says. “Instead, we turn them out when they’re pregnant.”

### Submission rates

Neil currently rears around 500 heifers a year, but plans to increase this to 750 a year while, at the same time, reducing age at first calving to 22 months. “Recent investment in our calf unit and staff development has helped improve our heifer rearing operations, allowing us to calve our heifers earlier with fewer losses at a lower cost,” he says.

In a bid to improve the herd genetics, Neil only selects bulls with a lifespan score of at least +0.2 and +500 for milk yield.

Everything is inseminated using AI, with 57% in-calf by 100 days and a calving index of 382 days.

“We are constantly trying to improve fertility so we monitor submission rates, which stand at 72%, and pregnancy rates, which are currently at 26%, and have a fortnightly vet visit,” he says.

Neil also scores the cows’ transition success to monitor how well they come through the calving phase. “We are averaging an 80% success rate, which is the percentage of cows that calve without a case of milk fever, retained placenta, displaced abomasum, metritis score of three or four, or culling incident within 30 days of calving.”

Fortnightly checks and a rigorous hoof trimming programme have boosted the herd mobility score from 75% to 95% during the past five years.

Milking three times a day, staff training and coaching is important. “We carry out full milking prep at every milking, focusing on hygiene and udder stimulation, and during the winter we introduced teat sanitising brushes at the point of entry into the parlour.”

He also monitors case rates on a monthly basis, uses cell count data to identify problem cows and cluster dips after those cows have been milked. “Any cow with two cases of mastitis in a lactation is culled.”

Neil has also been working to improve forage quality. “We aim to use 50% of our

land for maize silage production and we spread our manure solids on that land, which is ploughed in immediately,” he says.

“The rest of our crops consist of lucerne and grass leys for silage production. Our aim is to use our biggest resource – our land – to grow the best quality forages at the highest yields, using manures as efficiently as possible.”

Neil is currently adding pipelines to make spreading liquid manure easier and is also building an anaerobic digester with a sand separator.

### Technical performance

Given the recent steep decline in milk prices, the timing of such an investment may be questionable. But Neil is confident that his herd is here to stay. “The end of milk quotas poses a threat of over-supply of milk products, leading to probable further price drops,” he says. “To combat this, we intend to become among some of the most competitive dairies in Europe by continuing to increase scale and improve technical performance.”

Neil also sees a bright future for forward-thinking businesses ready to take on the world market. “That is why we joined Arla in 2014, to take advantage of the future global demand. I strongly believe that our industry needs to co-operate more, and Arla’s access to international markets is unique among UK milk buyers.” |