

Decide what sort of cow suits your system and stick to your guns

Clear breeding goals reap benefits

Consistency is key on one Derbyshire-based unit that, for the past four years, has been in NMR's top three herds ranked on Profitable Lifetime Index (PLI). Much of this success is down to well-defined breeding plans, designed to achieve uniform cows with nothing too extreme.

text **Karen Wright**

Eric Easom is very clear on the sort of cow needed for the 350-cow pedigree Broomhouse Holstein herd. One of four of the late David Easom's sons, Eric runs Broom House Farm with brothers Mark, John and David, four of their sons, and their sister Helen.

"We want medium-sized, functional cows – nothing too big or high maintenance," says Eric. "Like everyone else, I like to see show cows. But that's only part of the jigsaw. They must also have good health and production traits and be durable."

Although he knows most of his cows – and their breeding, Eric admits that there's no preferential treatment. "We haven't got time for that," he says. "There's no in-parlour feeding or feeding to yield and there's not a lot of spare time to pander to problem cows."

Three units make up the 290 hectares farmed by the family and provide grass and wholecrop triticale forages for the herd's TMR ration. These are balanced with locally-sourced bread and dough, rape and soya meal, maize meal, a protected fat and a vitamin and mineral package. This diet is fed on a flat rate to the whole milking herd, maintaining a feed conversion efficiency of around 1.43.

Milking rota

Each brother has specific responsibilities but all team members share the weekend and evening milking, on a four-weekly rota, of this 10,151kg yielding herd, which averages 3.92% fat and 3.21% protein on twice-a-day milking.

"We do our own AI and have between six and eight bulls on the go at any one time. The herd has been closed for more than 30 years and we breed all the cows and heifers to dairy sires."

Breeding their own replacements is the main focus, but surplus cows and heifers



Dairy heifers: the next generation



Eric Easom: "The bar is set high in sire selection"

are sold either privately or through Leek market. "It is purely down to numbers – we sell about 70 or 80 head a year, depending on housing and on the numbers in each group."

Eric illustrates this consistency with a group of OMan daughters, now in their fifth lactation, who averaged 82 points as heifers and are now all classified excellent. Fertility is good, with a group average calving interval of 384 days, with all heifers achieving at least 50 tonnes of good quality, low-cell-count milk.

Equally, a group of Leif daughters have performed well and are in the running in this year's Derbyshire herd competition. One is an EX93 cow in her

fifth lactation and has given more than 60 tonnes of milk to date, generating a lifetime daily yield of 22.75kg.

Lifetime success

"Lifetime yield is a good reflection of performance. It represents everything we breed and manage our herd for. Cows need good yields, fertility and health in consecutive lactations to score well. There's little difference between our cows here and it's the sort of consistency we want throughout the herd," Eric says, adding that they have achieved this over many years with clear and defined criteria when it comes to sire selection.

"PLI is the starting point and I set the bar high, screening potential bulls for milk quality as well as management traits like health and production," he says, admitting that he never ignores new indices.

"We're reaping the benefit of these now, after many years of selecting bulls with good fertility and a low-cell-count index. Conception rates are improving and the latest calving to conception rate is 70 days. Our rolling annual average SCC is now 108,000 cells/ml."

Eric's next sire screening step is based on type, starting with size and avoiding anything too big that won't be comfortable in their cubicles. "Also, I

question the lifetime feed efficiency of large cows. They eat more and cost more to keep, so they must produce a lot more milk just to cover their maintenance costs."

Teat length is important at Broom Farm too. "I make sure teat length isn't too short because this can be problem in the parlour with units falling off. You can have all the potential in the world in an animal, but she's no good if you can't keep the milking unit on."

Good legs, feet and udders also come under scrutiny in selecting from the sire list and so does rump angle. "High pins are a personal dislike. I am not sure that this is justified in terms of a management problem, but it's just something I don't like. And, of course, price plays a part. Some young and new bulls have over-inflated prices that I can't justify."

Best match

Eric's chosen list of sires is used in a computerised corrective mating program to give the best match for each cow and to avoid any potential inbreeding. The final line up will be a team of young genomic bulls and proven sires – enough to spread the risk, but all meeting high criteria. "The selected bulls are of a high calibre, so if any one sire does fall away there's enough cushioning to avoid problems."

Bulls currently in the flask, which meet Eric's rigorous criteria for PLI, type and good value for money, include: Cayman, Charley, Blackjack and Gatedancer. And promising young stock coming into the herd, from sires he used 18 months ago, include: Nadal, Cabriolet and Supershot daughters.

As the rate of genetic progress increases in UK dairy herds, more use will be made of genomic testing among heifers in the family's herd. About 25% of heifers have been tested during the past four years and, compared with their parent average, some are 100 points higher in PLI, while others are 100 points lower.

"The difference is that genomic testing tells us which heifers are higher and we can target these – so it helps us develop our breeding plans. It's all about using the most up-to-date tools that help us make progress yet maintain a consistent herd of cows. Our latest average herd PLI is 210 and 237 for heifers, with little difference between the top and bottom cows, and the plan is to stick to our goals and keep making good progress." |

