

**Leanne Hedges**

A passion for dairying and Holstein breeding is what drives this herd manager. Today, she's not only working with a leading UK herd, but she also owns a few of her own cattle.



Herd size:	140 cows
Average yield:	7,600 litres
Somatic cell count:	70,000 cells/ml
Unit size:	122 hectares

'Can-do' attitude lays foundations for a bright dairying future

Don't tell me I can't ...

A non-farming background hasn't stopped one aspiring herd manager from thinking big when it comes to dairy genetics.

We spoke to her to find out more.

text **Rachael Porter**

Drive and determination, as well as hard work, has seen one young herd manager not only travel around the world, but also make her showing debut, buy her own dairy cattle, and achieve top price for a dairy calf in a national sale – all during the past seven years.

And that's even more impressive considering that Leanne Hedges comes from a non-farming background and only began working with dairy cattle at the age of 18.

Today, the 31 year old manages Jonny Lochhead's Dumfriesshire-based 140-cow organic herd of pedigree Brown Swiss, plus 130 followers and 10 young bulls. The herd is run on a grass-based system at the 122-hectare unit, with cows grazed for as long as possible each year. When they are housed, typically in November, they're fed grass silage and concentrates, according to yield, through the unit's 12:12 herringbone parlour.

Leanne says it takes around two hours, twice a day, to milk the herd. "It's a new

parlour – the herd was previously milked by three robots for five years. But that just didn't work out. Staff were spending far too much time pulling out cows that had only milked on three quarters. The automatic system was creating more work – and problems – than it was alleviating."

Cow flow was constantly interrupted, and cows were not being milked frequently or thoroughly enough. "So Jonny decided to go back to conventional milking and we're all really happy with the new set up – cows included."

The herd is currently averaging 7,600 litres of milk, at 4.10% butterfat and 3.63% protein. Somatic cell count is running at 70,000 cells/ml and all milk is sold through OMSCo.

Non-farming background

Leanne, who is originally from Warwickshire, says that her passion for dairying was ignited when, at 16, she took an animal care course at Moreton

Morrell College. "I knew that I wanted to work with animals, but I wasn't sure in what capacity."

At that time, the college had a dairy herd and Leanne took one lesson a week in agriculture: "It all started there. I also did some work experience on a farm and got more involved with the college's unit. I was hooked."

'Can-do' attitude

The opportunity to go and work on a heifer rearing unit – rearing young stock for eight different herds – in New Zealand came up, but she'd just started a second animal care course and didn't want to up and leave. "I'd just turned 18, so it seemed a big step. And I also had to organise a visa and a flight in just six weeks, which seemed impossible," says Leanne.

"Someone I worked with said that I couldn't do it. And, if someone says that something can't be done – or I can't do something – I typically set out to prove them wrong."

Organic herd: milk from the Brown Swiss milkers is sold to OMSCo





Best of both worlds: the unit at Mouswald, where Leanne is able to run her Holstein cattle with Jonny Lochhead's pedigree herd

So, with her 'can-do' attitude, she sorted out all the necessary paperwork and hopped on a plane. And she says that it was the best decision she ever made. She then came back to the UK for six months – and worked on a sheep unit in Cornwall, before heading back to New Zealand for a two-year stint as an assistant herdsman on a 340-cow unit. "That was a great place to cut my teeth. It was a simple system and the people I worked with were knowledgeable and friendly. I learnt a lot while I was there." Leanne came home again and took a job at Callington in Cornwall, on a 180-cow unit. "They'd been looking for a herdsman for a while and they gave me a chance. The role grew and I became assistant herd manager."

Holstein experience

That was a high yielding pedigree Holstein herd and Leanne says that that's when she fell in love with the breed. "They were totally different to the cows that I'd been managing in New Zealand – all udders and dairy strength. I was in awe of them." She travelled again, this time to Australia and the US, to work on other dairy units, including the famous US-based Luck-E Holstein herd. And she also worked on other UK-based units – including one in Lancashire and one in Herefordshire – all with different management systems.

"The diverse experience on my CV has, I think, made me more employable," she says. "And, for me, having all those different experiences in several different countries has been fantastic."

It was her time on the Herefordshire-based unit that sparked her interest in showing cattle. "I helped to show some cattle while I was at Wyevalley Holsteins and I really enjoyed it."

Show-ring success

A herd manager in Bolton was her next role. "That was a step up, in terms of responsibility, and the owner also allowed me to do a little showing too. He had good cows, but had never wanted to do it. So I had a go and it was great fun and extremely rewarding."

It was here where Leanne took yet another step up the dairying ladder and bought her own cows. "That was also a great motivator for me. The owner allowed me to run my three cattle – a cow and two heifers – with his herd.

The first cow that she purchased, Normead Million Helena VG89, was one she spotted at a sale. "I can still remember that day – it was the start of yet another chapter for me," she says. Helena calved and produced a heifer – the first to carry Leanne's HedgeLea pedigree prefix, HedgeLea All About Helena. "I then bought Ingleview Goldwyn Charlie," she says. She sold a

Kandie calf – HedgeLea Awesome Kandie Krush – for 6,000 guineas at the Black & White Sale in 2017. "That's was definitely one of the highlights of my dairy breeding 'career' so far," she says.

"But I do know that I can own a few cows – and good ones – that I can breed from and show, if I want to. I can dabble in quality dairy genetics and enjoy owning and milking a few good cows." Leanne says that she's inspired by her friend and cattle breeder Molly Westwood, of Panda Holsteins.

"I'm impressed with the herd she's set up and the quality of her cows. I follow what she's doing and I want to do that too.

"Here at Mouswald, Jonny is happy for me to run my cows with his Brown Swiss herd and he's also keen on showing, so that's something else that I've been able to continue with since moving here," she adds. "I do know that, in some ways, I have the best of both worlds."

Ultimately, she says, she would like to own and run her own herd. "But it's important to be realistic – that's something that may never happen. There are so many barriers to entry – not least having the finance.

"If an opportunity does come along, I need to have the knowledge and experience – and the cows – to grab it. But for the foreseeable future I am very happy here in Dumfries" |

