

Cross-bred sires produce cows that are 'fit for purpose'

Horses for courses

Sires developed to breed replacements for herds managed on grass-based systems are taking the stress – and the guess work – out of buying semen for one Staffordshire-based producer.

We spoke to him to find out more.

text **Rachael Porter**

As one of the earlier adopters of a true New Zealand-style grass-based system, Staffordshire-based producer Ian Walker knows a thing or two about the type of cow that's best suited to this set up – and how to breed them. When he took the plunge, back in 2003, he switched from running 180 all-year-round calving Holstein Friesians to a 300-head mixed herd of Jersey and New Zealand Friesian crosses, as well as a few Brown Swiss.

"Back then I decided that if I was going to do it then it was all or nothing," he says. "I wanted to switch to block calving in one hit, so I bought in 100 head of Jersey crosses, from Ireland, which were

due to calve in the spring. These were great cattle and did exactly what they were supposed to do. I have a 12-year-old from those original cows. They offered good longevity."

Grazing platform

Any cows in the herd that didn't fit with the new calving pattern – a nine-week block that starts on February 1 – were sold. And he began pushing cow numbers up to 300 head. He has a grazing platform for a maximum of 320 cows – around 103 hectares. There's a further 80 hectares for grazing 170-head of young stock and for additional grazing and silage, as required.



Ian Walker: "We want to breed dairy replacements that are 'fit for purpose'"

This is all connected with four miles of astro turf cow tracks – essential for paddock grazing, according to Ian. "Each one is five metres wide and built on a foundation of rubble and stone. Investing in cow tracks has really helped to improve hoof health and we don't have a problem with lameness." So feet are one less thing to worry about



when it comes to sire selection, although he does ensure that all bulls have a positive score. “Our cross-bred cows have good feet and legs, but the tracks help to prevent issues with lameness.”

Milking at Rowe Farms ceases on December 15 each year and dry cows are then out on fodder beet until the end of January. They’re then housed for a short while before calving and turned out again to grass.

CRV Avoncroft’s Richard Williams has been working closely with Ian for the past five year, helping him to select the best sires to use on his spring-block-calving herd, in order to breed replacements that are ‘fit for purpose’.

Obvious choice

“Ambreed sires were the obvious choice from the start as they’re tried and tested on grass-based systems, predominantly in New Zealand,” says Ian. “These bulls sire daughters that do well on Kiwi systems, so they’re certainly going to thrive here in Staffordshire,” says Ian. And they certainly do perform well. Ian is currently seeing average yields of around 5,391 litres, with 4.93% butterfat and 3.78% protein. The herd is milked twice a day through a 30:60 Waikato parlour with ACRs. Milk is sold to Lancashire-based Yew Tree Dairy, which pays for constituents. “So we do breed for plenty of fat and protein – that’s definitely important to us,” he says.

Aside from that, he and Richard select sires that score well for longevity and they also want to maintain stature and avoid breeding cows that are too big. “We never compromise on fertility,” says Richard. “Next on our ‘must-have’ list is capacity, followed by udder and then feet and legs. We also look for a plus on milk. We are firm believers that if the animal is put together correctly then we can look for – and expect – production,” adds Ian.

At the start of every breeding season he sits down with Richard and together they look at all the Ambreed sires that are available. “We select a team of five or six bulls for the AI flask that are all quite similar and offer all the type and production traits that we’re looking for,” explains Richard. “This ensures that we’re breeding a relatively uniform group of replacements, which will join a uniform herd of milking cows.”

Both agree that this is certainly the result that they’re seeing – a herd of cows with similar stature and type that are ideally suited to a grass-based system. Daughters joining the milking herd this year included Thadius, Selwyn, Overdrive and Deluca. “And they’ve all hit the spot,” says Richard. “They all have great udders and plenty of capacity, as well as being extremely milky.”

He adds that more mature cows performing well in the herd are by sires including: David, Overdrive, and Viktor.

This year’s team of sires comprises Seagull, who offers good capacity as well as fertility and milk; Ruskiebear, who is a high-milk bull with excellent capacity and fertility; Raven, who offers good udders, high protein, as well as fertility and plenty of capacity; Viper, who produces daughters with capacity, milk and fertility; Viking, who offers calving ease as well as good udders and fertility; and Tararua, who also offers good capacity, fertility, plenty of milk and exceptional udders.

Uniform herd

This year’s group of sires are all plus for fertility, udders, feet and legs, and capacity. Milk averages +616kg and fat and protein averages +52kg.

Ian is happy with his move to a grass-based, spring block calving system and he’s also pleased with his cows. “They’re uniform and relatively trouble free – we’re breeding good replacements and building on the genetics that we bought in 15 years ago.

“Working with Richard and selecting CRV Avoncroft-Ambreed sires, which are ideally suited to our cows and the management system that we run, makes the whole breeding process simple and straightforward. It’s a reflection of the block-calving management system itself, which also makes running the dairy herd a little easier and has allowed us to improve our work/life balance.” |

