

**Ron Pietersma**

A passion for a traditional breed has not only seen it survive in the US, but positively thrive. Cow numbers are up and Dutch Belted performance is better than ever.



United States of America

Herd size:	4,500 cows
Dutch Belted cows:	1,000
Milk production:	8,000kg (three-times-a-day milking)

US-based producer ensures that Dutch Belted's future looks secure

Character and dairying clout

When one US-based producer bought his first Dutch Belted semen straws 25 years ago, he had a dream – that one day he would milk 1,000 such cows. Today 2,000 cattle, with their characteristic white belts, fill the barn at his three dairy units.

text **Wichert Koopman**



Dutch Belted cattle facts

The American Dutch Belted is related to the Dutch so called 'lakenvelder'. The breed is descended from cattle that were imported from the Netherlands more than 100 years ago. Initially, Dutch Belteds in the US were mainly kept for their striking appearance. Later, however,

the owners also discovered their dairy strengths. The Dutch Belted Cattle Association established a herd book in 1886 and it is still in use. In contrast to the Dutch 'lakenvelders', the US breed has never been crossed with beef breeds. It is, therefore, more dairy-like and

productive. In the 1990s there were fewer than 100 animals in the US herd book. But the popularity of the breed has grown and there are more than 1,000 new registrations each year. The Dutch herd book currently has about 350 members with a total of 4,000 animals.

When Ron Pietersma bought his first dairy farm in 1978, at Chino Valley in California, he called it 'Legend Dairy Farm'. Today his business comprises three units, which now form Legend Dairy Farms, with a total of 4,500 cows. California was a strong dairying area for many decades, but the expanding city of Los Angeles has pushed many herd out of the valley. Ron's units are three of the

20 remaining in the area – 380 dairy businesses have moved out or closed down – and he now farms in a highly urbanised environment.

Ron's grandfather emigrated to the US from the Netherlands in 1906, at just 18 years old. He took a job as a farmhand and after a few years he bought his first own dairy cows. This herd was further expanded by his son, Ron's father, and finally sold in 1971. Ron initially worked as a journalist and photographer but eventually decided that dairying was also for him.

He remembers cows on the farm where he grew up that had the instantly recognisable 'belt' around their body. "As a child I thought that was very special," he recalls.

When he discovered in the early 1990s that the Dutch Belted breed was in serious decline he wanted to do something to prevent it from disappearing all together. "At that time, it was estimated that there were no more than 500 pure-bred Dutch Belted cattle worldwide, and fewer than 100 animals were registered in the US herd book," he says.

As a commercial producer, Ron understood the breed was struggling because it could not compete economically with other breeds. "A unique appearance is not enough for a breed to survive – it has to offer other benefits and it has to be commercial.

"I wanted to do more than just keep the breed going. I wanted to improve it by selective breeding and make it an attractive option for commercial producers. That was – and is – the best guarantee for an assured and sustainable future."

Proud heritage

Pure-bred Dutch Belted cattle were not available to buy in the US 25 years ago so Ron, who was a passionate and successful

breeder of pedigree Holsteins, bought Dutch Belted semen to cross breed his herd. By using these straws on uniform black cows, he bred animals with the desired 'belted' pattern in the first generation. And then he consistently used Dutch Belted sires to eventually breed pure animals.

In 1998 he bought in Dutch Belted cattle and five years later he bought another 15 cows and heifers at an auction. With the Holstein crosses and seven pure-bred animals that Ron tracked down and purchased from several other units, these cattle form the basis for the current Dutch Belted herd at Legend Dairy Farms. And this is, by far, the largest Dutch Belted herd in the world.

In order to be able to distinguish them on paper from the Holsteins, Ron also introduced a different pedigree prefix for the Dutch Belted cattle: 'Heritage Pride'. "It's fitting as I am proud of the birthplace of my family and the cradle of my cows," he explains. "Back in the 1990s I dreamed of milking 1,000 Dutch Belted cows and it is really satisfying to see that this goal has been achieved – and exceeded."

Phenomenal fertility

Around 2,000 Dutch Belted animals, of which more than 1,000 are being milked, run across the business' three units. The cows are housed in open yards with sun shades. "The breed's percentage in the herd is still increasing and they are also out-performing the Holsteins," says Ron. The Dutch Belted cows are run in a separate group, but they are managed on the same system as the Holsteins. "And they are healthier, produce plenty of milk with very few problems and the replacement rate for the breed is always less than 20%. That's much lower than the Holstein figure."

A second explanation for the continuous growth of the Dutch Belted proportion of the herd is, according to Ron, their fertility. "They calve easily and always



High yields: Ron's Dutch Belted cows are milked three times a day



Legend Dairy Farms are based in an urbanised area of the US

within 365 days. This means that we have plenty of replacements.”

Ron has also been able to sell several Dutch Belted bulls to commercial producers, to use as sweepers, in recent years. “These producers want to get their cows back in calf and the Dutch Belted is known for its phenomenal mating ability and, most importantly, fertility. Customers tell me that if a Dutch Belted bull runs in a herd alongside a Holstein bull, the majority

of calves born have the unmistakable belted appearance of their sire.”

Milk yield

Ron adds that a Dutch Belted cow is equal to two thirds of a Holstein. “This means that she’s two thirds of the size of a Holstein, requires two thirds of the amount of feed and produces two thirds of the amount of milk,” he explains.

Cows are milked three times a day and, in this regime, the Dutch Belted group

averages 8,000kg of milk per year. Ron doesn’t know the average butterfat and protein because milk is combined in the tank and, besides, he’s not paid for milk constituents.

His top yielding Dutch Belted are producing more than 10,000kg of milk. “And it’s these cows that can easily compete with – and beat – Holsteins in my herd and many others around the world.” Heritage Pride Poppy 617 is one of Ron’s best Dutch Belted cows. In 2015 she became the world’s first Dutch Belted to classify with 94 points for conformation and she was also highly productive. She produced 14,520kg of milk, at 3.1% fat and 3.1% protein, in her fourth lactation.

Ron is really pleased with the performance of the Dutch Belted cows in his herd and the progress that the breed has made in the US during the past few decades. “The cattle and their performance figures are the ultimate confirmation that it should be possible to make the breed economically profitable again.

“I don’t know for sure what will happen to the Dutch Belted cows in my herds when I finally retire,” he says. “But I don’t worry about the breeds future. They make a clear statement with their performance and they’re certainly holding their own in our herd.” |

Current favourite: Heritage Pride Flora (EX94) has so far achieved a total lifetime production of 61,000kg of milk, with 3.90% fat

