



Scottish family's herd retains production ranking top spot

How do they do it?

One Scottish dairying family has retained top position as NMR's highest Holstein production herd in the organisation's latest Annual Production Report for the year ending September 2017. We spoke to them to find out how they do it.

text **Rachael Porter**

It's no mean feat – topping NMR's annual production report for three out of the past five years and, even when not taking pole position, remaining in the top three. So what's the Harveys' secret to success? And is it something the family set out to do?

“Not really – it's just a happy side effect of managing the herd as well as we possibly can and always looking to improve,” says John Harvey. “We are very driven – we're not for sitting back a little when things are going well. We always want to do things better.”

This past year has certainly demonstrated that. The 335-cow herd, based at Beeswing in Dumfries, increased its production by 15kg of fat and protein to

an average of 961kg and by 583kg of milk to 13,662kg, on three-times-a-day milking. And there's quite a gap between them and the producers in second place – DJ and KL Leadbetter, who run a 56-cow herd in Derbyshire. Their herd's fat-and-protein average for 2017 was 911kg, with 12,656kg of milk on twice-a-day milking.

Top yielders

The Harveys' Killywhan pedigree herd also boasts 46 out of the top 50 highest yielding Holsteins in Scotland, as well as many more in the top 100. And the top five cows in the list are all from the Drum Farm-based herd. The star performer, leading the ranking, is Killywhan Bolton Fenella. She produced

20,388kg of milk at 4.0% butterfat and 2.89% protein, in her third lactation.

The herd is also home to Scotland's top heifer on the production list – Killywhan Maxigoat Virtue, who produced 17,228kg at 3.28% butterfat and 2.92% protein, in her first 305-day lactation.

The herd is permanently housed except for one group, of around 100 mid-lactation cows, which is turned out to graze at the end of May, if conditions are suitable. The unit's 260 head of young stock also graze during the summer.

The herd is fed a TMR, offering maintenance plus 36 litres, and individual cows are topped up to yield with concentrates fed through the

Table 1: Harveys' herd performance on three-times-a-day milking, 305-days

year	F+P (kg)	milk (kg)	position in NMR APR ranking
2017	961	13,662	1
2016	946	13,079	1
2015	937	12,789	3
2014	903	12,252	1
2013	878	11,779	2



parlour. Cows and heifers calve all year round, to ensure a level supply of milk for buyer Lactalis.

PLI ranking

What's surprising is that, despite the phenomenal yields and overall herd performance, the Harveys' herd doesn't feature in the UK's top 10% based on genetic data. John explains that the reason the herd doesn't feature high in the PLI table is because its maternal data doesn't go back very far.

"We just don't have much dam data and



Harvey family

Brothers John and Stuart, and their mother Margaret, have topped NMR's annual production report for an impressive third time and we find out how.



Herd size: **335 milkers**

Herd average yield: **13,929kg**

100-tonne cows: **three**

Calving interval: **404 days**

our cows' PLIs are, on the whole, based on sire data. But this is improving – we've been adding more dam information during the past decade and we're beginning to move rapidly up through the PLI rankings."

The Harveys only began milk recording in 2006 and 2016 was the first year the family saw cows officially reach the production milestone of 100-tonnes of milk. "We had six hit the target that year," says John, adding that that was just the start. "In 2017 we had six more cows reach the magical milestone and so far this year we've had one and several more are expected."

Dairying is like juggling, according to John, and there are always a lot of balls in the air. He says that his family do well

with their dairy 'juggling' because all three of them – brother Stuart and mother Margaret – work closely together to make sure nothing is 'dropped' or overlooked. "We all have our own strengths but we all know exactly what's going on in every area of herd and business management. There's good teamwork. I know we're lucky in that respect. And we make sure that we don't stand still and we're moving forward. We always want to improve on the previous year, but we never know if we have until the year has passed and the figures are in, so to speak.

"So all we can – and do – do is focus on the job in hand and do our best."

Team approach

John adds that if some area of performance isn't as good as the previous year then they analyse it and look at how to turn things around. "We relish a challenge and we'll quickly work out why something isn't working and how it can be improved – particularly when there are three heads to come up with solutions."

Management aside, he says that breeding has also played a role in the herd's continued success. "Our aim is to breed good, strong cows. When it comes to sire selection, we avoid using bulls that are too tall and always look for a positive milk yield," explains John.

Health and fertility are key too – they want a robust cow that will 'get herself back in calf'. "We have a voluntary waiting period of 60 days and prefer not to 'interfere' until cows are more than 100 days in milk. So it's quite tight if

Brush up: a cow enjoys some grooming



Cow comfort: cubicles are clean, soft and inviting at the Beeswing-based unit





Next generation: the Harveys plan to breed fewer dairy heifers and use more beef semen on their herd

we're going to keep our calving interval down. It's around 404 days now and we like to keep it between 395 and 405 days," he explains. "Our genetics and our management means that we're on track to do that. And our cows have the fitness traits needed for longevity."

In fact, they've one seventh lactation cow in the herd at the moment and two cows that have just calved for an eighth time. "Longevity is good and I

think that this is also because we focus on dry cow management and aim to get them through this, the most stressful period in a cow's production cycle, as smoothly as possible."

Critical time

John says that this, alongside calving and the immediate post-calving period, is the critical time for all dairy cows. "So we work hard to manage the cows through

this 'hump' and safely out the other side."

The Harveys run a transition group of fresh-calved cows within the milking herd. "It pays to have them together in one place. If there are any problems then they can be easily spotted and we can intervene early. They're not hidden in a larger group."

So what have the Harveys been focusing on during the past year to keep the herd forging ahead? "We've started treating the cows with the Startvac vaccine. This has resulted in a marked decrease in somatic cell count, as well as improving cow health. It should also reduce our antibiotic use in terms of both mastitis and dry-cow therapy."

"We've also invested in more rapid filling water troughs in cow housing, particularly for the transitional group. And we've also added two cow brushes – cow welfare is so important. We've also taken a general look at possible cow comfort improvements."

Quite a few heifers in milk have been sold this year – around 70 head. John says that this has been a welcome additional income stream: "Going forward, we're using a lot more beef semen and are only really intending to carry the young stock we're likely to need, mainly to reduce workload. Our replacement rate currently sits at between 25% and 30%."

He says that the family's focus will remain on optimising and improving herd management. "It's about looking at the small things, as well as the bigger picture. And it's great to do well in production reports and other rankings. It serves to underline that what we're doing is being done well and it spurs us on to keep management on track and to strive to do even better." |

Milking herd: cows are housed all year round and fed a consistent TMR

