

Yields and cow numbers have risen at one Herefordshire-based unit, but maximising profit – not milk output – is what drives its owner because that's what makes his business a success. We spoke to him about his recent – and considerable – rise through the NMR APR rankings.

Continued attention to detail and a 'can do' business attitude are just two of the reasons why Herefordshire-based producer Henry Lewis believes that his herd, based at Tack Farm near Bromyard, has done so well in this year's NMR annual production report APR rankings.

But he's not chasing yield. He says his system just lets cows maximise their potential and gets them milking well – vital when running a 420-cow flying herd and faced with considerable fixed costs. The pedigree Winslow herd has expanded by 100 cows since 2004 and moved up an impressive 15 places in NMR's Holstein production rankings – from 21st to sixth – in 12 months. Average yield in the latest report, for the year ending September 2007, is 11,962kg at 3.83% butterfat and 3.13% protein, from three-times-a-day milking.

Despite his phenomenal success, Henry says that securing a top place in the APR rankings or winning herd competitions and awards – the Winslow herd has won many over the years and Henry was crowned 'dairy farmer of the year' in 2006 – were never something he set out to do.

"These achievements are the icing on the cake and another welcome signal that I'm doing something right," he says.

Milking team

Henry is a modest man – he is doing a lot 'right' and testament to that is the realisation of his ambition to be able to make his business pay well enough for him to employ someone else to milk. He actually has a team of four men who, between them, spend between 15 and 16 hours a day in the milking parlour. "If you can't afford to pay someone to



Henry Lewis: a 'can do' attitude is part of his success

milk when you're producing more than four million litres of milk a year, then it's a poor job," says Henry.

A total of six staff work at the unit, including a herdsman and an assistant herdsman. "I've found that I have to be slightly over staffed for everything to run like clock work and I see it as my job to oversee and manage."

Herdsman Mark Lewis, assistant herdsman Dan Taylor and tractor driver Steve Hanson are integral to the business' success and Henry says it simply wouldn't work without them. "They are spot on at managing the herd and that gives me valuable time to keep a keen eye on everything.

"I look at the business as a whole and that would be difficult if I spent all day in

the parlour. When you spend the majority of your day looking at the back end of a cow, you can't see further than the next milking."

Another thing that's change recently is the move away from rearing replacements. For the past three years all replacement stock has been bought in and Henry's really happy with his decision, not least because it seems to have reduced the number of TB reactors and 'shut downs' at the unit.

The herd has been housed all year round for several years now and now there's no young stock running outside and picking up the disease. According to Henry, it's made all the difference. A 'relief' is how he describes the switch to becoming a flying herd.

TB tests

"I was losing up to 50 head of cattle a year, but now it's just one or two and most of the tests come back negative.

"And I can buy in the stock that I want – I like to buy cows and heifers with potential."

He says he's not interested in pedigree breeding at all: "I look at a cow and if I like it, I buy it. I don't look at the pedigree certificate – I trust my eye."



Dream team: milker Pauwel Fryga (left), assistant herdsman Dan Taylor (centre), and herdsman Mark Lewis

High yields are just one 'side effect' of efficient dairy herd management

Chasing high margins – not milk



Milking well: the herd's ration ensures that cows can realise their potential

Some people told him that he'd done the wrong thing, because he has a herd of good pedigree cows. Flying herds don't usually have a 'good' reputation, but Henry's out to change that.

The entire herd is now put to Belgian Blue bulls and calves are sold to local buyers.

He's not chasing yield, despite his APR success. He's chasing profit. "If I wanted to see higher yields I'd milk just 300 cows and push them harder. I make more profit by spreading my fixed costs over more cows. More cows means more profit."

Another key to his success is maintaining momentum. "The business is like a big

wheel – it's important not to let it slow down if it's going to be efficient and keep improving.

"Even when things were much tougher than they are today, we continued to invest."

Never satisfied

And what's also important is to keep things simple. KISS or 'keep things simple stupid' has been Henry's motto for many years. "I sometimes think that my system sounds complicated, but it really is simple. The herd is milked and housed as one group – all cows are fed the same TMR – and I don't feed anything in the parlour and I feed

what's cheap. It's all about margin at the end of the day."

And he doesn't think there's anything special in what he's doing. "There are lots of other producers out there doing what I'm doing. It's all about doing the best with what you have and always trying to do things better.

"I'm the first to admit that I'm never satisfied with the business – I always think there's room for improvement and there usually is. I'm always looking for more.

"That's what gets me out of bed in the morning and keeps my interest going. I enjoy the challenge."

So, would he consider upping cow numbers even further as part of that challenge?

"I say never say never. I'm not afraid to have a go. I'm an opportunist – I know that I have to get out there and make it happen – and that's exactly what I'll continue to do."

Rachael Porter