



The Miller family
Increasing herd size and stepping up fertility and health management are just some of the key factors that wowed this year's Gold Cup judging panel.



Herd size:	350 milkers
Unit size:	336 hectares
Average yield:	12,199kg
Calving interval:	410 days

Crowning glory follows an Olympic effort from the UK's leading dairy herd

Happy and glorious



A glittering gold trophy – the ultimate accolade for UK producers – was held aloft by a deserving family at this year's Livestock 2012. We find out more about the winners of the top prize in the 2012 NMR/RABDF Gold Cup competition.

text **Rachael Porter**

As the cheer went up on the NMR stand at this year's Livestock event, another dairying family and herd went down in history.

The Miller family from Evesham, Worcestershire, scooped the 2012 NMR/RABDF Gold Cup. Mike and Shan Miller and sons Paul and Steven run the Shanael Holstein herd on their 336-hectare tenanted unit and their win follows success in the 2011 competition, when they were runners-up and won the NMR Silver Salver.

"We are absolutely delighted – it's such an achievement for the whole family," says Paul, adding that it's the ultimate reward for all their hard work. "And

some definitive proof that we're doing it right. What greater accolade is there?" The publicity surrounding their achievement has served to raise the profile of the herd, which can only be a good thing when there are surplus heifers to sell. "Pedigree breeding and stock sales are a large part of what we do, so winning the industry's top prize is a real bonus. We're really looking forward to the obligatory open day next year – it'll be a chance to show off our system and our cattle," says Paul.

As well as increasing herd size and taking on more land during the past 12 months, the team has also stepped up fertility and health management.

"Winning has given us a renewed zest for what we're doing. It's put a spring in our step and we're raring to go.

"We have facilities for 350 cows in the milking herd and by the end of the year we should hopefully be fully stocked. It makes sense to maximise the use of our buildings and parlour and we have the team to manage this number of cows."

Impatient to increase cow numbers, the Millers are in the process of purchasing animals from quality pedigree herds. "We look at type and production carefully but we are very careful when it comes to health status. We buy in BVD and IBR vaccinated stock from Johnes'-free herds then stick to strict protocols



The herd is milked three times a day



Good feed storage facilities minimise waste



Cow comfort is a top priority at the unit

on the farm, vaccinating for IBR, BVD and Lepto.

"We will hold herd size at 350 cows for a few years I think," adds Paul. "This should give us some replacements to sell and add another income stream to the business. Hopefully we'll have about 50 heifers to sell next year.

"And maybe in three years there might be plans to expand further but we'll see. We're open-minded and if wheat prices hold and milk price falls then maybe we'll grow more cereal crops instead."

That said, the Millers are dedicated to the dairy industry and are rightly very proud of their successes to date, particularly in the breeding of quality dairy animals. Their latest news is that two bulls, which were exported to Canada as embryos, have qualified to join the Semex stud.

Closer to home, management of the farm is a family affair overseen by Mike, with Shan looking after calves and accounts and Steve and Paul taking on cropping and cows respectively.

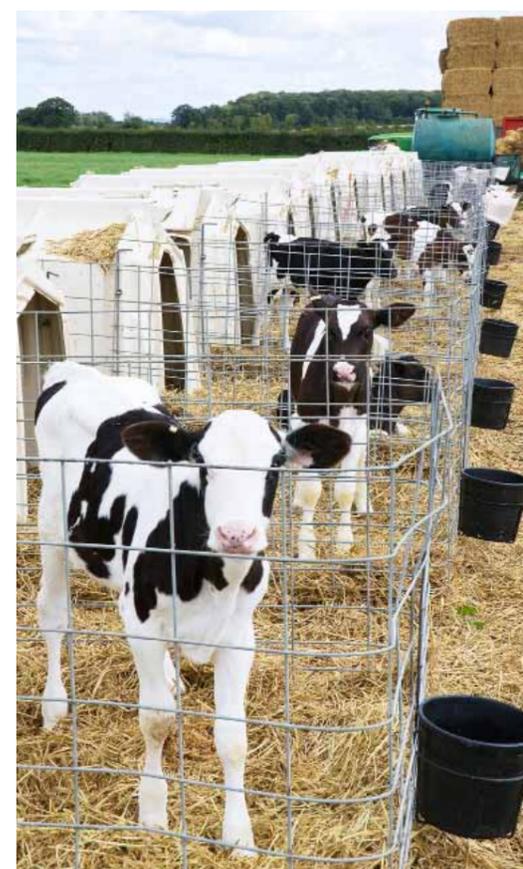
The core of the business is the well-being of the Shanael Holsteins cows, with an NMR average production for the Gold Cup qualifying year ending September

2011 of 12,199kg of milk, 535kg higher than the previous year, at 3.6% fat and 3.08% protein on three-times-a-day milking.

Along with milk yields, Paul is pleased to see an improvement in calving interval – a drop of 11 days from the 2011 Gold Cup figures and a drop of 20 days in the past 18 months to 410 days.

"We've made a real effort to improve fertility. We're calving year round and we're now more aggressive in checking for heats. We have increased routine vet visits to every two weeks and monitoring individual cows and trends through InterHerd – our vet and consultant can also access this data and the reports so we're all working from the same information.

When it comes to breeding decisions, the Millers want the 'best' for their top pedigree cows. For them this means bulls with a high PLI and a cross that will appeal to AI studs and buyers in the UK and abroad. For the more commercial cows in the herd, they look for bulls that produce cows with good functional traits, and are capable of producing 11,000kg of milk or more and will last for four or more lactations. |



Shropshire-based herd retains LDY award

The Chris May Memorial Award, for the herd with the highest average lifetime daily yield among NMR/RABDF Gold Cup qualifying herds, has been won by the Higgins family, from Wilderley Hall Farms near Shrewsbury, for the second year running. The family's 290-cow herd achieved a lifetime daily yield of 18.22kg

for the year ending September 2011.

Bill and Margaret Higgins run the pedigree Holstein herd, with sons Andrew and Bill, on 145 hectares. They rear all replacements. Average age of heifers at first calving is 24.9 months. Cows are in the herd for an average of four lactations.

"Achieving a high average lifetime yield for the whole herd requires a calving age as close to 24 months as possible and good longevity," says Andrew. "But it also calls for cows not to be dry for too long and to be milking to their full potential while at the same time remaining fit and healthy.

"There's no secret to how we achieve this, but we believe a consistent diet is vital, along with good management and care, particularly the transitional period."



From left to right: RABDF president David Leaver, Bill Higgins junior, Bill Higgins senior, RABDF chairman David Cotton, Andrew Higgins, and NMR chairman Philip Kirkham