

One of Florida's largest dairies thrives on personnel development and practical breeding

People, practicality and profits

North Florida Holsteins has seen much success through innovation. And, of all the tools and strategies in place, managing partner Don Bennink says the most important are investing in staff, adapting technologies and practical breeding.

text **Amy Ryan**

Being home to 10,000 head of cattle (4,700 cows, 4,000 heifers, 350 bulls and 350 steers), North Florida Holsteins is one of the largest dairies in Florida and its website sports the tagline 'Quality milk from comfortable cows!'

Managing and developing this type of operation is no small task, and managing partner Don Bennink says he relies on great people. "As a producer, you can have the best cows, machinery and land, but you need the best people to make it all work," he says. "Procuring, educating and training staff is very important as you get larger and I am extremely lucky to have tremendous team members."

The company employs 100 full-time, part-

time and trainees with a management team of seven in various roles on the farm. With underlying objectives of supporting the welfare of employees, animals and the environment, as well as providing employees with opportunities for growth and self improvement, Don sets the overall operation goal of remaining an on-going entity that provides employees plenty of job security. To help achieve this goal, it offers numerous on-farm training opportunities.

International exchange

In addition, it is open to researchers from the University of Florida and an international student programme run by

North Florida Holsteins

North Florida Holsteins in the USA takes pride in motivating its employees and providing job security while adapting new technologies.



Number of cows:	4,700
Number of heifers:	4,000
Amount of land:	975 hectares
Rolling herd average:	11,135kg of milk at 880kg fat and 720kg protein

Ohio State University. This programme, which began in 1991, has brought more than 200 students from every inhabited continent to the farm. Between eight and ten students are on the farm at any one time. They spend a year learning how each department operates before breaking into their specialised areas of study.

"The programme was developed to allow students to see, first hand, large dairy herd management and take that knowledge back to their home countries," says Don. "We have on-site housing and stipulate that no two individuals from the same country, or who speak the same foreign language, live together, so they have the opportunity to learn other cultures while improving their English."

For Don, the most rewarding part of the programme is seeing participants go home and succeed or recommend people to enrol. "Through my world-wide travels, I have connected with many past students," he says. "It is gratifying to see them do well and talk with parents who are extremely grateful for the programme."

Florida beginnings

Although Don was born in Florida in the early 1940s, it took years of farming and practicing law in New York to lead him back to his birthplace. "Ironically, I was born in Florida. Shortly after losing my father in World War II, my mother decided a move back to her home state of New York was going to be the best fit for us," says Don. "She taught there and I worked for many dairy producers until I finished college and rented a place for my cattle."

Don's busy schedule as a lawyer often conflicted with his farming schedule. While travelling to Florida for a case, he says he saw a real opportunity there. After reassigning his cases, he purchased a feedlot property in June of 1980, the groundwork for what has now become the home of North Florida Holsteins.

Their first construction project was a

Don Bennink with By-My Rudolph Sally EX 90, at the time she broke through the 160,000kg of milk barrier





NO-FLA Oman Heidi 20611 is one of the most influential cows for North Florida Holsteins

double-10-point-parallel milking parlour and by September, they were milking 125 cows. Just five years later, the herd had grown to around 1,000 cows and a double-12-point parlour was added. In 1990, a mere five years later, 3,600 cows called North Florida Holsteins home and they were being milked in a newly added double-40-point parallel parlour.

Don feels that the operation has differentiated itself in Florida by emphasising cow comfort and genetics. This is where adopting technologies, namely tunnel ventilation and genomics, have been very important. "There are three major problems facing dairy producers in Florida: heat and humidity, mud, and producing quality forages," he says. "To address the heat and humidity, we were the first dairy to have tunnel ventilation and worked on perfecting it with sprinkler systems and evaporative cooling."

Cow families

How did Don grow the herd so rapidly? This is another area where the people part of the industry comes into play. He grew through buying whole herds of cows that good dairy producers had developed. "We were contacted by breeders looking to sell their herds because they preferred to keep their whole herd together, as opposed to dispersing to various herds around the US. And they knew our interest in developing good cow families," says Don. "We also had the reputation of offering flexible payments, which assisted with tax implications."

He attributes much of the success of the North Florida Holsteins breeding programme to the acquisitions of these herds.

Namely, he says, their approach of purchasing whole herds to sometimes secure one cow family has afforded them the opportunity to work with some of the best cow families and consistent breeding lines to further develop their herd's genetic potential. Embryo transfer (ET) and in-vitro fertilisation (IVF) have also boosted herd growth and genetic development.

Profitable cows

The North Florida Holsteins' breeding philosophy has always focused on developing the most profitable cow for the commercial dairyman. In a nutshell, Don sums this up as 'good, practical, long-lived commercial cattle that pay the bills'. That is where the outstanding transmitting cow families mentioned earlier, along with some of the key cow families that made the trek with Don from New York, have contributed most.

"We don't market to fads. Our ultimate goal is breeding cows that net the most revenue for commercial dairymen," he says. "We choose the highest production and highest health trait sires available and always look for outcross bulls that meet our second goal of keeping matings below 3.5% inbreeding."

Don also credits genomics, on both the paternal and maternal sides, with rapidly advancing the genetic pool in the North

Florida Holsteins herd. "We are using 100% genomic sires and have a new rotation of bulls within one month of the sire summary.

"If you look at the current top five on the gTPI list, we have daughters of each of the sires and we would have very likely used few, if any, of these sires if it weren't for genomics."

The dairy has been genomically testing all heifers for the past two years to identify animals to genetically develop further. While Don says that many of the higher genomic individuals usually hail from their key cow families, this method helps identify outsiders and starts new cow families of interest.

IVF pregnancies

Once identified, these animals under go intense ET and IVF programmes. In fact, two-thirds of the pregnancies carried by heifers and between 10% and 20% of the pregnancies in the milking herd on the dairy are IVF pregnancies from the top 3% (genetically) of the herd.

One of the most influential cows for North Florida Holsteins is NO-FLA Oman Heidi 20611, VG 87, whose dam was a Pebble Beach Prince of Wayne daughter that Don purchased from a neighbour in New York.

He says that a high percentage of his genomic offspring are coming from this O-Bee Manfred Justice-ET daughter or other branches of her family, with many of them being in the 850 to 900 net merit range.

While Don says North Florida Holsteins doesn't actively market its genetics, they are doing business with all the major AI companies because their cow families are consistently producing high value offspring. They sell about 100 bulls to these companies a year, as well as between 1,100 and 1,200 bulls to commercial dairymen.

With a strong dedication to people, innovation and breeding, Don's vision for North Florida Holsteins is creating an on-going entity with continued growth opportunity for the future and stability of workforce.

"I expect to add working equity partners who share the same goals and are committed to growing the business by investing in employees and new technologies while developing good cow families," he says.

"Ultimately, I want the business carry-on for many years after me and to ensure that employees have plenty of job security." |