

Six herds line up for a chance to shine in national competition final

Britain's got dairy talent

Six dairy units have made it into the final of this year's NMR/RABDF Gold Cup competition. They will be judged by a panel that will visit each of the herds ahead of the winner announcement at the Livestock Event in July.

text **Karen Wright**

The NMR/RABDF Gold Cup competition judges – RABDF chairman, former Gold Cup winner and Lancashire-based producer Ian Macalpine; NMR board member and Isle of Anglesey-based producer Trevor Lloyd; and 2012 Gold Cup winner from Worcestershire, Mike Miller – are busy reviewing this year's line up of impressive finalists. They'll be looking at each dairy business as

a whole, with a particular focus on their commitment to the industry and resource management as milk price volatility continues.

The winner of the 2015 NMR/RABDF Gold Cup and the runner-up, who receives the NMR Silver Salver, will be announced at 4.30pm on the NMR stand at the Livestock Event, at the NEC in Birmingham on Wednesday July 8.



➔ Want to find out more about each of this year's finalists? Read a full report on NMR's website, at www.nmr.co.uk, and see who you think should win the coveted title in 2015.

Brian Yates & family, East Logan, Castle Douglas

This is the second time that Brian Yates has entered his 277-cow herd, which he manages with help from wife Sheila, son

Michael and daughter Anna, as well as herdsman Trevor Hough and Leslie Craik. The pedigree Logan herd also

qualified in 2014. It is attention to detail that has paved the herd's way to success. Housed all year round and fed a TMR, the herd's average production, for the year ending September 2014, was 11,707kg at 3.97% fat and 3.13% protein, with 109,000 cells/ml on three-times-a-day milking.

Impressive yields are fuelled by the Yates' use of the Keenan Pace system, which Brian says produces a consistent ration and also allows him to benchmark the performance of his herd. "It is monitored on a daily basis and changes can be implemented on farm and, if required, remotely," he explains. Feed conversion efficiency stands at 1.63 litres per kilogramme of feed – the Scottish average stands at 1.34.

The herd calves all year round and the in-calf rate 100 days post calving stands at an impressive 65%, with just 3.6% of cows not in calf by 200 days.

"It's the little tweaks, here and there, that make the difference. There's rarely one thing that good health or fertility hinges on," he says, adding that he is a great believer that things can always be improved.

Michael and Brian Yates



Fergus McDowall, Kirkcudbright, Galloway

This is the first time that Fergus McDowall has entered his 850-cow herd, which is based at Rerrick Park and managed with help from a team of 16 staff.

Creating a sustainable farming future for his family is at the heart of everything that Fergus does. The original family unit was 'standing still' with 180 cows and no space for expansion. So, in 2010,

the McDowall's took a huge step and invested in a new greenfield site. "The plan was to expand to 400 cows, but the business went from strength to strength, which gave us the confidence to grow to the size we are today," explains Fergus. And he's not finished there. Plans are in place to expand the herd further, with the construction of a 200-place cow house set to begin later this year, which will swell herd size to 1,050 milkers. "The 24:48 swing-over parlour will be running for 20 hours a day – just about taking us up to full capacity," he says. "We're going to mirror the facilities that we already have – they suit our herd and system really well," he adds. Mastitis incidence is low – just 7.5% in 2014, which was only 56 cases in the herd. And this is, in part, due to the sand-bedded cubicles and the comprehensive parlour routine, which includes pre-washing with a brush. Production stands at 10,445kg of milk at 3.9% fat and 3.29% protein on three-times-a-day milking.

Fergus McDowall



Arthur Palmer, Norbury, Staffordshire

Arthur Palmer runs his herd with what he describes as a simple and uncomplicated dairy system. His aim for the 400-cow herd is to maximise yields and milk from forage above the current 4,000 litres. The block calving system makes use

of extensive grazing to achieve average yields of more than 10,000kg. "We want a simple system to help keep costs to a minimum. Block calving allows us to focus our management efforts and make full use of grazing and labour. We run an intensive system in

the winter and a New Zealand-style system in the spring."

Up until 2006 this herd was 100% Holstein, but Arthur wanted cows better suited to his simple, grazing-based system. So now the herd is 30% crossbred and increasing to 100%, using Norwegian Red sires followed by Fleckviehs.

Calf rearing is a priority and is managed by Sally Lea. She looks for good growth rates so the young heifers can be turned out at five or six months old. They are not housed again until they join the milking herd.

Arthur has invested in more than two miles of sleeper tracks so cows can get to the grazing easily. "We measure the grass weekly with a plate meter to calculate a grazing wedge. And we're also committed to regular reseeding with modern high sugar grass mixtures. New reseeds typically produce an extra two litres per cow per day compared to old leys."

The system is delivering the goods. In the year to September 2014, this twice-a-day milked herd averaged 10,063kg of milk at 4.02% fat and 3.26% protein, with a SCC of 171,000cells/ml.

Arthur Palmer and Sally Lea



Metcalfe family, Leyburn, North Yorkshire

Metcalfe Farms is a family partnership, run by brothers David, Brian and Philip, with retired parents John and Thora and



help from a team of 20 staff. The 900-cow herd is milked three times a day through the unit's 32:32 rapid-exit parlour, which runs for 20 hours each day.

The herd has been expanding for the past four years, almost doubling from 550 head using a mixture of bought-in and home-bred replacements. Housed all year round and fed a TMR, the herd's average production, for the year ending September 2014, was 10,926kg of milk at 3.58% fat and 3.14% protein, with a

Philip Metcalfe

somatic cell count of 196,000cells/ml. The next big step for the business, according to Philip, is installing a new rotary parlour – a 72-point Boumatic. "This will allow us to increase numbers by 300 or 400 cows."

The business has also invested in training and developing staff.

"We're building a skilled team using local people," explains Philip. "Full-time staff members are allocated key responsibilities, such as 'calf feeding' or 'fertility'.

"After considerable expansion, we're now looking at a period of fine tuning."

Neil Baker, Haselbury Plucknett, Somerset

Having been a finalist an impressive three times, it's possible to follow Neil Baker's business progression in detail. In 2014 he said he was planning to increase herd size, boost milk yields and improve herd health, mastitis and fertility.

And today the family-owned Rushywood



Farm now extends to 692 hectares, with herd size growing by 520 head during the past year to 1,800 cows. With 55% of the herd being heifers, yields are currently running at more than 11,000 litres sold.

"Our business strategy is to broadly follow what our family has been doing for the past four generations," says Mr Baker. "This is to care for our animals in the very best way so they produce high yields at low costs, and so that we can invest in people, facilities and further expansion." Milking three times a day and with a qualifying average production of 11,772kg

Neil Baker

at 3.62% fat and 3.25% protein, Neil monitors mastitis case rates monthly. He uses cell count data to identify problem cows and cluster dips after those cows have been milked. "Any cow with two cases in a lactation is culled."

Priority is placed on staff training and coaching.

Neil says that he sees a bright future for forward-thinking businesses ready to take on the world market. "That is why we joined Arla in 2014, to take advantage of the future global demand. I strongly believe that our industry needs to co-operate more, and Arla's access to international markets is unique among UK milk buyers."

Messrs Harvey, Beeswing, Dumfries

For the second year running the Harvey family are through to the final. Brothers John and Stuart, with their mother Margaret, run the 208-hectare unit that supports a pedigree Holstein herd of 322 cows and 340 youngstock. A 'hands-on'



family, one of them is always part of the three-times-a-day milking team. Other responsibilities are allocated to each family member, assisted by a team of five general farm workers.

Herd size has remained static for the past two years after a period of rapid expansion. In the year ending January 2015, 3.7 million litres of milk were sold to local buyer Lactalis from the all-year-round calving herd.

The Harveys pay particular attention to cow health with a policy of minimising risk. This starts with breeding strong cows with good width and sound feet

Stuart, Margaret and John Harvey

that are suited to the high production system. High yields placed them at the top of NMR's annual production report for the year ending September 2014, logging 12,252kg of milk and a record-breaking 903kg of fat and protein.

"We aim to minimise the risk of disease," says John, who follows a careful vaccination programme for BVD, IBR and leptospirosis and incorporates blood testing and strict calving and colostrum protocols into a Johnne's control plan. Calves are vaccinated against coccidiosis and pneumonia.

"It's vital that we get them off to the very best possible start and protect our investment," he adds.