



Every producer sets goals for his farm. These goals may differ, but the herd is always at the heart of the business. In this six-part series we set out to help you to improve your herd. Our sixth article focuses on breeding to improve health.

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Selecting for health traits plays a vital role in running a profitable and sustainable herd

Healthy cows, 'healthy' business

Good cow health is key to maximising longevity and, through breeding, it is possible to select for bulls that sire 'trouble free', efficient and profitable daughters to build a 'robust' herd. We spoke to a County Durham-based producer to find out more.

text **Rachael Porter**

County Durham-based producer Andrew Pounder knows only too well the importance of breeding for health or, in his particular experience, udder health. He runs the 200-cow pedigree Stainton Hill herd, near Barnard Castle, with help from his wife Pam and son Scott, his father in law Dennis, and his

parents Joe and Margaret. And around 10 years ago, with their help, he really began to focus on selecting sires based on udder conformation in a bid to improve udder health – and longevity. "We felt that our heifers were calving down with too much udder condition – udders were too 'fatty' and conformation



Andrew Pounder: "Cows are now averaging at least six lactations"

wasn't good. They didn't milk as well as they should, only lasting for between two and three lactations. We like to see at least six lactations, if not more," he says.

"And udder health was suffering too. We were seeing more cases of mastitis because udders were not milking out properly. There was too much 'heft' in their udders as heifers and the central ligament support just wasn't there. The udders were extremely 'loose' by the time they reached their second and third lactations."

Because the udder is so central to what makes a productive, healthy and profitable dairy cow, it's little wonder that Andrew was seeing poor longevity.

“But once we pin pointed the problem, we could start selecting sires to help reduce and eliminate it – in just a generation or two,” he says.

Closed herd

He breeds all his own replacements for the Holstein Friesian herd, which is currently averaging 9,100kg at 4.14% butterfat and 3.32% protein. And he’s been working with CRV Avoncroft’s SireMatch program for the past 15 years. It was this tool that allowed him to alter his selection criteria, with some advice and support from the company’s Iain Brown, in order to increase the number of lactations he was seeing from individual cows and improve the overall longevity of the herd.

“The rear and central ligaments in many of Andrew’s heifers were simply not strong enough and, as a result, he was seeing far too many cases of mastitis and ‘blown bags’,” says Iain. “Breeding has a role to play in helping to prevent and reduce the number of cases of mastitis where udder conformation and condition is less than ideal. So

name	Better Life Health (%)
Delta Atlantic, Delta Anthony	10
Delta Titanium	9
Delta Bookem Danno, WD Reminder	8
De Vlottenburg Fantasy-Red, Cookiecutter MOM Hunter, HJR Windstar-Red	7
Delta Wifi, Vero Startrek	6
Debutant-Red	5

Table 1: CRV Avoncroft top Better Life Health bulls (Better Life Health is compiled from the following breeding values: udder health, daughter fertility, sire calving ease, vitality, maternal calving process, maternal calf vitality, hoof health, calf survival and ketosis)

Andrew and I set about improving udders through breeding. Breeding for better udder conformation and udder health will result in a healthier cow that will last longer in the herd. And a herd comprising healthier cows will, ultimately, be more efficient.”

The longevity or life span of a dairy cow determines how many productive lactations she completes within a herd – and how happy a producer is to have her in the milking herd. “Aside from mastitis, other issues such as hoof problems can also be a health ‘issue’ that result in involuntary culling,” says CRV Avoncroft’s David Matthews.

“Good legs and feet are just as important as udders – both udder shape and udder health help to determine the longevity of the cow. Producers need to breed for good functional traits to enable cows to live a long and healthy life.”

Selection criteria

Indeed, Andrew also selects sires with good feet and legs. His only other key criteria when choosing bulls to use on his herd are chest width and fat and protein percentage. Today he’s milking daughters by udder and health improving sires including Impuls, Goli, Fiction and Fidelity. And he has sires including G Force, Nilson, Mobile and Wanted in his AI flask at the moment.

Herd health, particularly udder health, has improved since he began selecting for better udders. SCC is down to around 100,000 cell/ml and the mastitis rate per 100 cows has fallen to 11 cases per year from 30 cases.

“Longevity has definitely improved,” says Andrew. “We’re averaging at least six lactations from our heifers now, as they mature through the herd. We have some cows in their eighth and ninth lactations and they’re still producing extremely well, with nice tidy udders.”

A reduced replacement rate means that his requirement for heifers has also fallen and he’s able to sell some surplus young stock – a welcome additional stream of income. “We rear between 60 and 70 a year and typically sell between 15 and 20 head.”

He says that ultimately, productivity and profitability aside, it’s more satisfying to manage a healthy and long-lasting herd of cows. “Milking ‘trouble free’ cows makes the job a lot more rewarding. And the investment in rearing heifers is money well spent – rather than an expensive ‘hit and miss’ exercise that invariably ended up in disappointment. My heifers and cows have tidy, well-attached udders that can last for many years – rather than just two or three problematic lactations.” |

Healthy herd: trouble-free cows will, ultimately, be more efficient

