

First-time finalists scoop top industry award

Golden debut for Dorset-based herd

No one was more surprised than Simon Bugler, when his herd was announced as this year's winner of the NMR/RABDF Gold Cup. We find out more about his impressive business and his reaction to lifting the industry's most coveted prize.

text **Jennifer MacKenzie**

As first-time entrants, Simon Bugler and his father Roland had no expectations when they filled out the forms for the 2016 NMR/RABDF Gold Cup competition.

So when they found out they'd made the final round they were extremely pleased – and excited. "If you're in the final six, there is a chance you could make it to the top. But, as first-time finalists, we really didn't think we'd win," says Simon, reflecting on their surprise but thoroughly deserved win.

Simon is the fourth generation of the family to manage the 570-cow pedigree Holstein Bettiscombe herd, plus 700 followers, at Pilsdon Dairy Farm near Bridport. He runs the farming partnership with his parents Roland and

Heather and 12 full-time employees. "And I think our strategy of prioritising herd health and maximising herd income from sources other than milk provided the winning formula," he says. "We want a herd of cows that will be able to produce the milk but will be able to have a calf every year and maintain a good level of health throughout the lactation."

Health traits

"We have always bred for good conformation, placing great importance on legs and feet. Health traits are becoming more important, in particular, fertility and low cell counts," says Simon, whose parents Roland and Heather started the partnership 40 years



Bugler family

Good genetics, combined with excellent health, nutrition and fertility management, has put this Gold Cup winning herd on the map.



Herd size:	570 milkers
Average yield:	11,684 litres
Pregnancy rate:	29%
Calving interval:	372 days

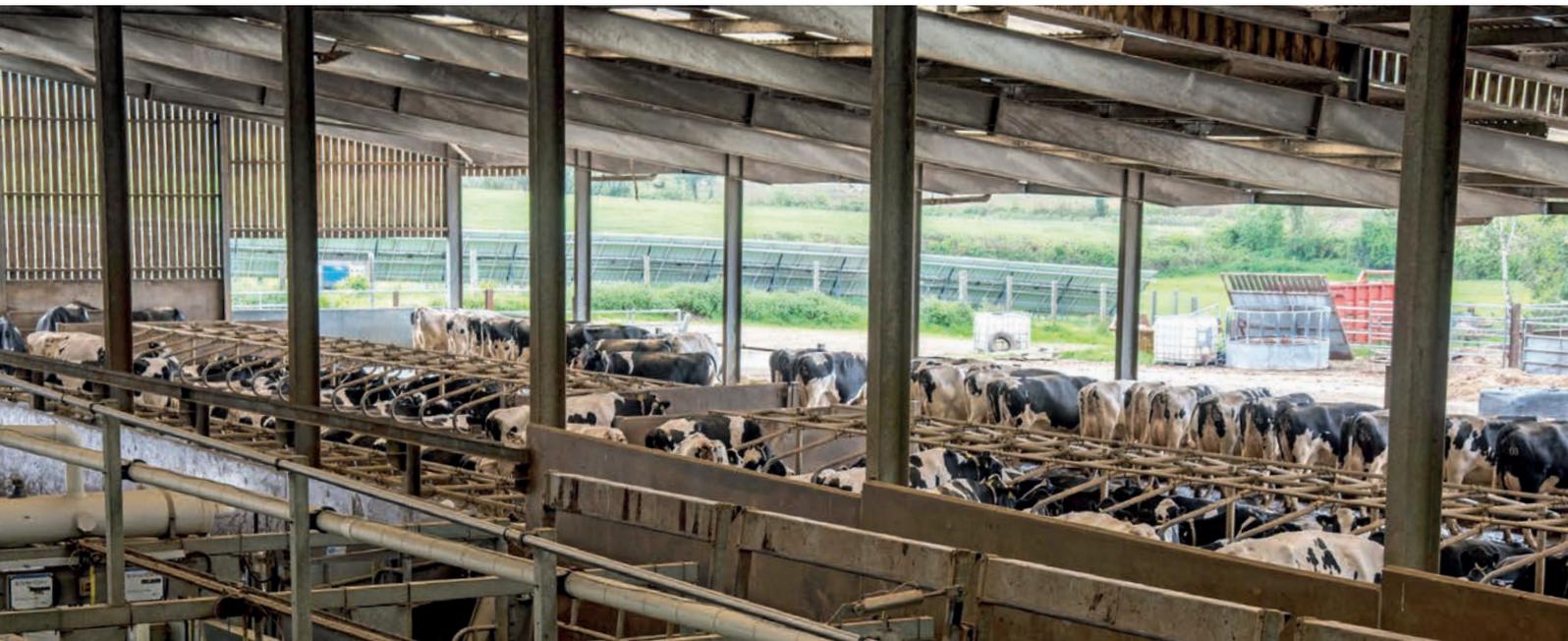
ago with 80 cows at an adjoining farm, which grew into a 180-cow herd.

The purchase of their current farm, and 70 commercial Friesians, further expanded the operation and buying other adjoining land has seen the owner-occupied hectares grow to 295, with a further 142ha of rented land used for forage and young stock grazing.

With Simon's enthusiasm for dairying and pedigree breeding, the two herds were amalgamated eight years ago and housed in a purpose-built unit, with as many welfare friendly facilities as possible, taking on the best ideas from visiting other units.

These included perimeter feed sheds for their natural ventilation. The housing has an integral 40:40 Boumatic rapid-

Cow comfort: a new shed was built, with welfare-friendly facilities, to house the amalgamated herd



exit parlour, which milks the cows three times a day.

Cubicles are sand bedded with a flood-wash system for passageways. Waste passes into a reception pit, before being mixed and pumped through a separator with liquid then moving through settlement chambers into a lagoon, for spreading by an umbilical system.

Roof water is used in the parlour, automatic foot baths and for the cows to drink and it goes through a filtration system and UV treatment before being stored in a tank. The collection system, in just a year to March 2016, had saved 30,000 cubic metres of water.

Solar panels at both units are rated at 100kW and have cut electricity costs for the dairy, the farmhouse and the business' three holiday cottages.

Automatic foot baths

Foot baths automatically empty and fill and there is automatic segregation to the handling facilities, which includes a handling race and tip-over foot trimming crush.

"Cows mobility scoring between 1 and 2 is down to 2%, according to the farm vet, and digital dermatitis is negligible," adds Simon. "We are sure this is down to the automatic foot baths, which empty three times during each milking. Formalin is used twice a week. This all helps to keep cows' feet clean.

"We also found that housing the cows all year round has improved foot health and resulted in fewer foot ulcers and stone damage. Feet are trimmed twice a year at 70 days calved and just before drying off."

The decision, six years ago, to house the cattle all year round has improved cattle health as well as increasing yields. Cases of mastitis have now fallen to 20 per 100 cows, down from around 35 in 2014. Cell count is running at 84,000 cells/ml and Bactoscan at 6. The latest herd average yield is 11,684 litres of milk at 3.76% butterfat and 3.18% protein on three-times-a-day milking.

Calving interval is now 372 days and pregnancy rate is 29%. The Buglers believe that a 13,000-kilogramme herd average is achievable, but they would not sacrifice herd health and fertility to get there. "Welfare and health targets are key to maintaining our Muller Sainsburys' milk contract," says Simon. "We have weekly vet visits primarily to check on fertility and PD cows, but also to take into account the general health of the herd. And we follow a strict vaccination programme



TMR ration: nutrition, genetics and excellent management combine to produce top yields

for BVD, Leptospirosis, Salmonella and IBR.

"Recently all our calves have been ear sampled for BVD and tests, so far, have proved negative. The herd is also monitored for Johne's disease and we have a control plan in place."

Dry-cow management

Continuing the theme of cow health, Simon has cut antibiotic use at drying off and now up to 95% of the dry cows receive no antibiotic treatment, just teat sealant. Previously all were double tubed.

While milk sales are the primary source of income, an important aid to cash flow has been the sale of up to 150 females a year through the monthly pedigree sale at Sedgemoor market.

Prices have dropped from between £1,800 and £2,000 a head to average £1,400, it is still a valuable source of income. "Our cattle sales are important," says Simon.

"The herd has been pedigree for the past four decades and for the past four years the herd has been closed and the focus is now on using sexed semen on the heifers.

"We also look to make genetic gains with the use of genomics, testing heifers to help with mating decisions."

Lifting the Gold Cup will certainly help to raise the profile of the herd a little more – and possible boost stock sales. "It puts our name out there, which is great news for the business. I think it will also help to sure-up our relationship and our contract with our milk buyer.

"But, more importantly, the win is a great morale boost for us and our staff. We're planning a celebration BBQ in August for all our staff.

"Then we've another busy year ahead, keeping the herd and business on track and planning for the Gold Cup winners' open day next summer. We're already looking forward to that." |

Tomorrow's milkers: sexed semen and genomics play key role in herd's breeding programme

