

Excellence – from feed and forage through to milk quality – shines through

Small herd hits the 'big' league

Outstanding management and producing high quality forage helped to earn one Northern Ireland-based herd a place in the final of this year's NMR/RABDF Gold Cup competition.

text **Angela Rhodes**

Gobsmacked is how Adrian McFarland describes his reaction to making it through to the NMR/RABDF Gold Cup competition final this year. "And we were delighted, too, of course," he adds. "Particularly when we saw the calibre of the other herds that we were up against. "We have a relatively small herd, so we felt a bit like Leicester City winning the Premier League – just for having reached the final judging stage."

Adrian farms in partnership with his wife, Sharon, and their eldest son, Ryan, recently finished his university studies and also works part time on the unit. Together they run a 106-cow Holstein Friesian herd, plus followers, on their 64-hectare unit, which is based near Omagh in Co Tyrone.

"It's the first time we've entered the



competition – we have qualified before but this year was different,” says Adrian. “We’re happy with herd performance at the moment and felt we had a good chance of getting somewhere. “That said, we were still pretty shocked to get through to the final – the competition is always pretty fierce!”

Technically efficient

Running a smaller unit does mean they have to be technically efficient to survive, particularly in the current economic climate. And it is the McFarlands’ attention to detail and cost control that clinched their place in the final.

The herd calves from September to March and is TMR and parlour fed in winter and grazed in summer to produce



an average yield of 8,069kg of milk at 4.2% fat and 3.28% protein, with an SCC of 101,000cells/ml.

Farming in the west of the province, high annual rainfall in excess of 1,300mm makes for challenging grazing and forage-making conditions.

“Three years ago we invested in our own forage wagon, which has allowed us to take advantage of the few dry windows that we see in the season to make high quality silage,” Adrian explains.

Soil fertility

In addition, Adrian and Ryan have focused heavily on improving soil fertility through extensive sampling and targeted use of fertiliser to optimise grass growth and quality. They hope this will take them close to their target forage yield of 18tDM/ha.

A combination of high D-value grass silage and well managed strip grazing means that the herd is averaging 1,835 litres of milk from forage per cow (3,443 litres per hectare) which is an improvement of 800 litres per cow in just 12 months.

Herd health and biosecurity are also key areas of focus for the McFarlands, who run a closed herd to reduce the risk of TB infection. They have an extensive vaccination programme for Leptospirosis, BVD and IBR as well as routinely monitoring their Johne’s disease status through NMR’s Herdwise scheme.

A combination of a scrupulous parlour routine with pre and post dipping, breeding for low cell count and good housing hygiene means that the herd is also running at an impressively low annual mastitis rate of eight cases per 100 cows. “We also keep a close eye on individual cell counts and look to ‘manage’ high SCC cows and persistent mastitis offenders out of the herd as soon as possible.”

This same attention to detail and high level of stockmanship is also reflected in the fertility performance of the herd, with 55% of cows in calf by 100 days post calving and only 4% recorded empty at 200 days. Both father and son share heat detection duties, but Ryan is in charge of bull selection with the emphasis on high PLI with high components to help maximise their United Dairy Farmers milk contract. “We also want medium-sized, functional

Qualifying herd: Adrian said that his herd getting through to the final round was akin to Leicester City winning the Premier League



McFarland family

Attention to detail – with a focus on reducing costs and improving herd health – are key to the success of one of the UK’s top dairy herds.



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| Number of cows: | 106 cows plus followers |
| Average yield | 8,069 litres |
| Milk from forage | 1,835 litres |
| Unit size: | 64 hectares |

cows that not only handle TMR efficiently but also make the best use of grazed grass,” explains Adrian.

The McFarland’s policy of getting on top of potential problems as soon as possible delivers high herd health and also keeps their annual replacement rate down at just below 25%.

Controlling overheads

The prolonged period of low milk price has called for a greater focus on technical efficiency and a close eye on costs.

In the financial year that’s just ended, the McFarlands achieved a margin over purchased feed of 18ppl and an overall cost of production just under 20ppl, excluding family labour. This has been achieved through good control of overhead costs in particular.

In common with many dairy units in Northern Ireland, the opportunities for the McFarlands to expand are limited by the availability of easily accessible and affordable land. “In the long term we would like to bring Ryan into the business on a full-time basis, so we need to be as efficient as possible and keep tight control of costs. This will allow us to maintain a profitable business that can weather the current milk price storm.

“And we can then look for expansion opportunities when prices improve,” adds Adrian.

For now, the family will continue to consolidate and build on what they have – a Gold Cup qualifying dairy herd and business. And that’s definitely something to be proud of. |