

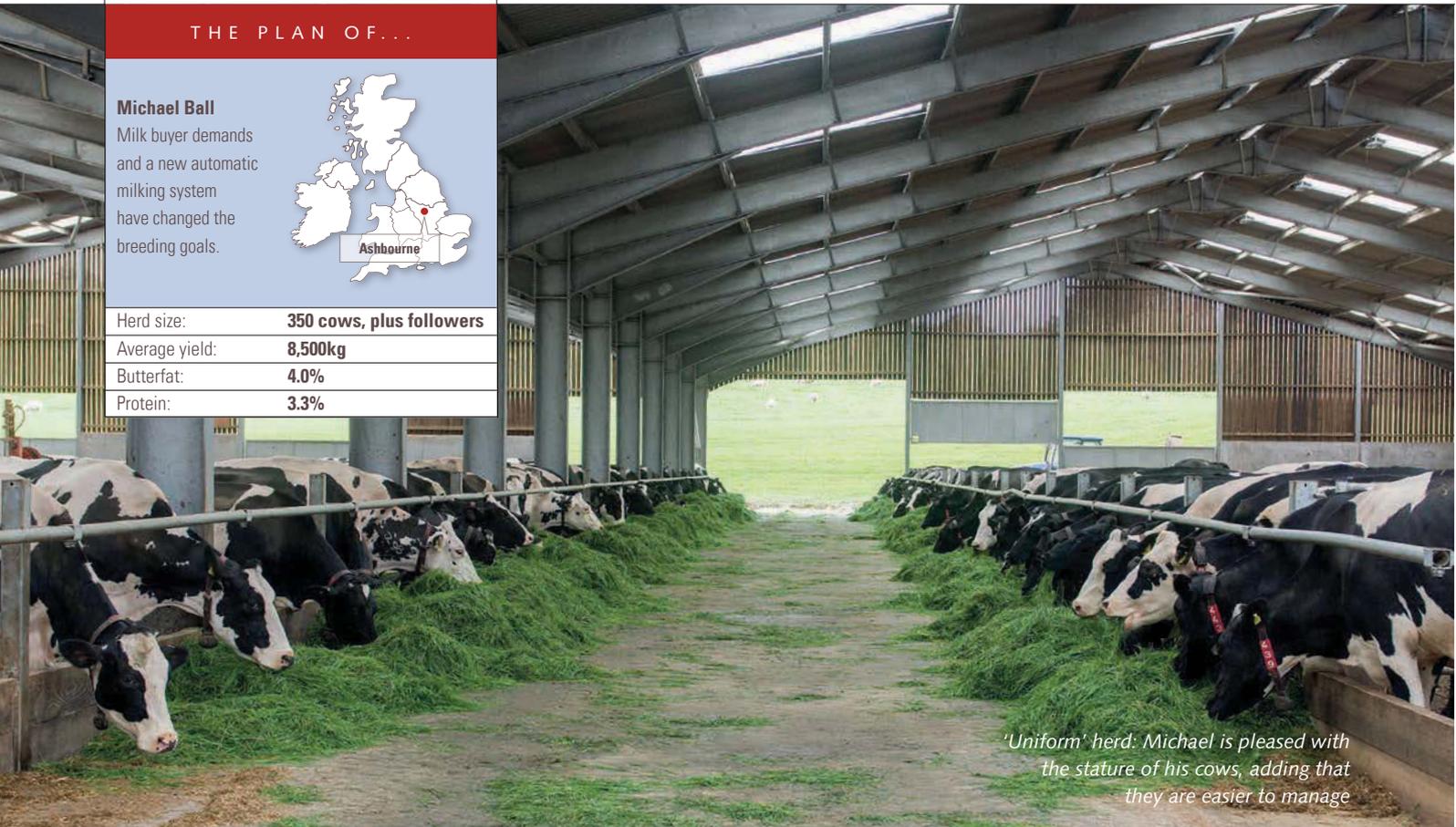
Michael Ball

Milk buyer demands and a new automatic milking system have changed the breeding goals.



Ashbourne

Herd size:	350 cows, plus followers
Average yield:	8,500kg
Butterfat:	4.0%
Protein:	3.3%



'Uniform' herd: Michael is pleased with the stature of his cows, adding that they are easier to manage

Take a 'commercial' route towards a more uniform pedigree herd

Avoiding extremes for easier management

Reducing stature and maintaining good milk constituents were two of the key breeding goals of one Derbyshire-based producer, who is now selecting to improve teat placement and milk yields.

text **Rachael Porter**

It's been a busy year for the Derbyshire-based Ball family. Eight Lely robots have been installed, replacing a 20-year-old herringbone parlour, to milk their 350-cow pedigree Houndhill herd.

Michael, who runs the herd in partnership with this brother Tony, has been focused on helping the milkers to adjust to the new set up.

"Things are going well, so far, with the recently expanded herd," he says. "Just two years ago we were milking 200 cows, but herd numbers have been pushed up

with a mix of bought-in and home-bred heifers."

The brothers decided to buy in some stock so they could fill their sheds and get up to capacity quicker. Most recently they bought in 50 freshly calved heifers and they're now waiting for a batch of their own heifers to calve this autumn. The herd calves all year round, with a slightly larger block in the autumn, and milk is sold to Freshways on a liquid contract. "We plan to become a totally closed herd again, once we're where we

want to be with cow numbers. We're aiming for between 460 and 480 cows milking at any one time, plus dry cows. That's about 60 milkers per robot, which is the ideal," says Michael.

Insight: genetic foundations

He and Tony are the third generation to run the herd at Vernon's Oak Farm, near Ashbourne, and it's been registered pedigree for at least 40 years. "But it's pedigree breeding with a strong commercial bias. I'm not into showing or selling pedigree stock. I'm looking, first and foremost, for cattle that perform well in the herd."

Today's herd is built on a foundation of large Holstein cows, predominantly from US and Canadian cow families and sires. "And they were very large. In fact, around 10 years ago we decided that they were just too big," says Michael.

“That’s when we switched to using Dutch semen from CRV. We wanted to use Holstein sires, but to avoid the extremes. Our herd was becoming ‘too Holstein’ in our opinion. And the Dutch Holsteins were more akin to the type of cow that we felt would perform well in our herd and on our management system.”

At that time milk was being sold to a different milk buyer on a cheese contract, so he and Tony were also looking to increase milk constituents. Milk yields were good – averaging around 8,000 litres – but butterfat and proteins were falling. “We were looking to boost components through breeding and the Dutch sires also offered that. So we were very much focusing on reducing daughter stature, without compromising body capacity, and improving milk quality, without reducing yields.

“And we also wanted to improve longevity – something else that the Dutch sires promised. And they delivered too. We’ve seen at least one additional lactation added to the herd average during the past decade and cows seem to be healthier and more fertile.”

Plan: herd uniformity

For the past eight years he’s been selecting sires, with the help of CRV’s breeding specialist Richard Bosley and the company’s SireMatch programme, to produce a more uniform herd of cows and heifers that meet his objectives.

“We’ve found that, if cows are tall, they tend to have more problems with lameness – there’s a lot more weight to carry around and I also think it makes their backs weaker too. A strong back helps them to walk more easily and this protects their feet.

“And if a cow is good on her feet she’ll last longer in the herd. It really is that simple. If she can’t walk then she can’t eat and she won’t milk or get back in calf. Feet and legs are everything, so our focus was in that area too.”

He says that the herd is much more uniform now: “We don’t have the extremes in the herd that we had a decade ago – the cows are fairly similar. They all have good capacity, but they’ve lost the angularity, and we’d like to keep them that way.”

Daughters milking in the herd at the moment include Grandprix, Surprise, Bertil, Cricket and Atlantic. “These are well-balanced cows and are an excellent foundation for use to continue building and improving on,” says Michael.

There are cows and heifers due to calve to Regard, Rocky and Debutant and there are straws from these sires still in the AI flask.

Improve: future plans

The brothers are now looking to add some more milk yield, but again they want to avoid anything too extreme. “And we’re also looking at teat placement now, since we installed the robots. Rear teat placement is important. If they’re too close together, or pulled inwards by a central udder ligament that’s too tight, that’s a problem when it comes to robotic milking. So that’s something new that we factor in, when working with Richard, to select sires for the next generation of milkers.”

Herd average yield is increasing, since the move from conventional twice-a-day milking to the robotic system, which milks cows upwards of three times a day. It’s creeping up from 8,500 litres towards 10,000 litres.

Although Michael is happy with that, he believes that his cows are now able to ‘handle’ more milk – they are more robust than they were 10 years ago – but he doesn’t want to compromise on solids. “We managed to push them up – with breeding and feeding – from 3.8% butterfat and 3.15% protein to 4.00% butterfat and 3.30% protein, prior to installing the robots.”

That said, he’s now selling milk on a



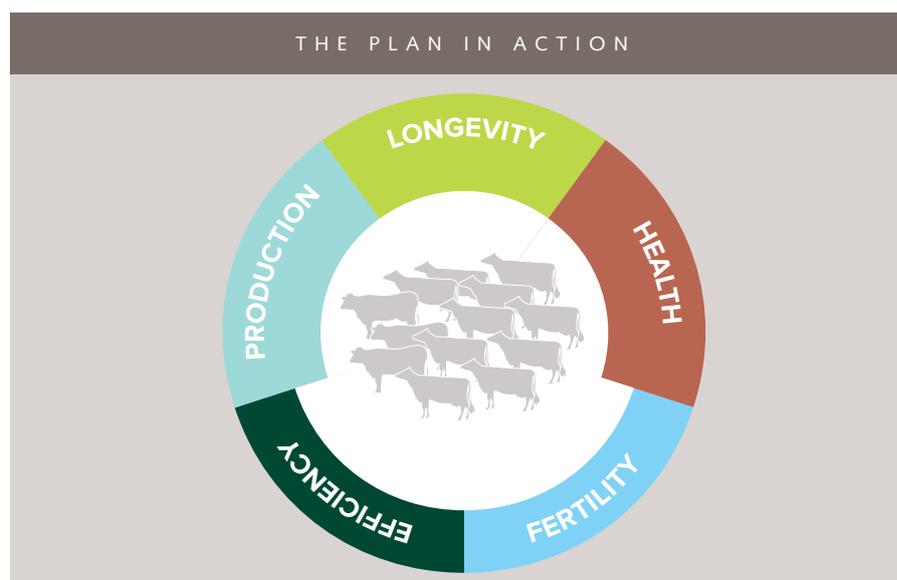
Michael Ball: “Longevity and teat placement are high on our breeding agenda”

liquid contract, so solids are less important from a milk-cheque perspective: “But I like to see constituents at a ‘healthy’ level and I’m happier now they’re higher.”

Michael is very much a commercial producer. “I’m no expert when it comes to breeding – that’s why we work closely with CRV Avoncroft.

“But I know what type of cow performs well in our herd and one that’s easy to manage and lasts for a long time. Health and fertility are key to completing several lactations – and ‘flying under the radar’.

“So we’re looking for the complete, uniform, ‘robust’ package that delivers that. I think we’re just about there. Our renewed focus on yields is testament to that – we’re feeling brave enough to put some milk back into our breeding without compromising other traits.” |



What traits are key to suit the management of Michael Ball’s herd?

Production

Yield is important, but high fat and protein percentages are key.

Longevity

Profitable cows combine high production with good longevity.

Health

Reducing stature, without compromising capacity, to prevent lameness.