

THE PLAN OF...

Mark Cash

An impressive 4,200 litres from forage is, in part, due to the dairy genetics being utilised by this spring-calving cross-bred herd.



Herd size:	330 cows
Average yield:	5,000 litres
Butterfat:	4.65%
Protein:	3.70%



Tomorrow's milkers: Jersey Friesian crosses are ideally suited to Mark's low-cost system

Jersey Friesian cows suit low-cost Kiwi-style system

Cross-bred low-cost success

Breeding for good fertility laid the foundations for one Yorkshire-based herd, which is managed on a low-cost spring-calving system. We spoke to one half of the farming partnership to find out more about breeding strategies for the herd.

text **Angela Rhodes**

The past 18 months of low milk prices have highlighted the need for production systems that are able to ride the inevitable peaks and troughs that come with greater exposure to world prices. But taking cost out of any system is not just about reducing expenditure it is about breeding cows

that can perform consistently well in a low-cost environment, argues Yorkshire producer Mark Cash.

Farming in partnership with James Waterhouse, at Fourth Milestone Farm near York, Mark is responsible for the day-to-day running of the spring-calving herd, which is predominantly made up

of New Zealand Friesian cross Jersey cows. The partnership farms 200 hectares of owned and rented land, which is all down to grass with the exception of 13 hectares of fodder beet. The business has an Arla manufacturing contract and the herd is currently averaging 5,000 litres, at 4.65% fat and 3.70% protein. This is produced from just 400kg of bought-in concentrates.

Insight: expansion

Mark helped to set up the herd four years ago, from a base of 90 pedigree Ayrshires that calved all year round. He has overseen its expansion to 330 cows, calving in a tight 12-week spring block. The expansion was achieved with a mixture of bought-in

cows, including a group of 40 pure-bred Jerseys, and through breeding cross-bred replacements. “We have also retained our nucleus of pedigree Ayrshires, but they get no preferential treatment and run with the herd,” he adds.

Having spent time working in New Zealand, Mark is a very keen advocate of the low-cost approach where as much milk as possible is produced from well-managed grass. He sees keeping the cost of production as close to 20ppl as the best way to ‘future proof’ the business, allowing it to breakeven when prices are poor and capitalise when they recover.

“The farm lends itself to spring calving because the land is free draining and we can turn out from mid- February when we start calving,” explains Mark.

“We only have housing for half the herd so we out winter the dry cows on fodder beet supplemented with round bale silage fed in ring feeders,” he adds. The autumn/winter milkers are fed silage and a small amount of concentrate but, overall, the herd is producing an impressive 4,200 litres milk from forage.

Plan: efficiency

“The key to the success of the system is to maintain a tight calving block, which then allows us to manage the cows as one group and make the most of the production from grass,” says Mark. And key to this is breeding. He says that the cross-bred Friesian Jersey produces a compact, efficient cow that offers the ideal combination of high milk solids and hybrid vigour, which drives fertility and longevity.

“New Zealand genetics have a proven track record of outperforming other higher production genetics in low-cost systems,” he explains. “And they also have the ability to perform in higher input systems and still bring the added fertility benefits that are often lacking in higher yielding herds.”

The herd calves in a tight 12-week block from February 10 and the serving window begins on May 5, when all cows are served to AI as soon as they come bulling during a four-week period. During that time, Estrotech scratch cards are used for heat detection with different colours used pre-serving and for subsequent services.

Mark also buys in a group of cross-bred bulls each year. Some are used to sweep up in the milking herd for eight weeks, and the remainder run with the maiden heifers for the whole of the serving period. “We have a ready market for the

calves born to natural service and have found that it is a more cost effective method than either synchronising the heifers or running expensive beef bulls, which might cause calving issues,” says Mark. “All our replacements are then also from AI sires and born at the beginning of the calving block.”

Improve: fertility

In previous seasons, while the herd was expanding, Mark focused primarily on breeding to improve fertility. This focus on fertility is paying dividends with just 10% of cows scanned empty at 12 weeks and fewer than 5% of maiden heifers not in calf in the same period.

A small group of proven New Zealand Jersey and Friesian bulls from CRV Ambreed are used each breeding season and are now selected on their NZ Breeding Worth Index. This is a composite index that attaches an economic value to key production and management traits including weight of solids, somatic cell count, fertility, longevity and, most recently added, body condition.

This trait has been added because cows with a good mid-season body condition score can be milked later in lactation and require less supplementary feeding to regain condition before calving again. “Since we run a very typical New Zealand system it makes sense to select the bulls that rank most highly under those conditions,” Mark argues. The cows are

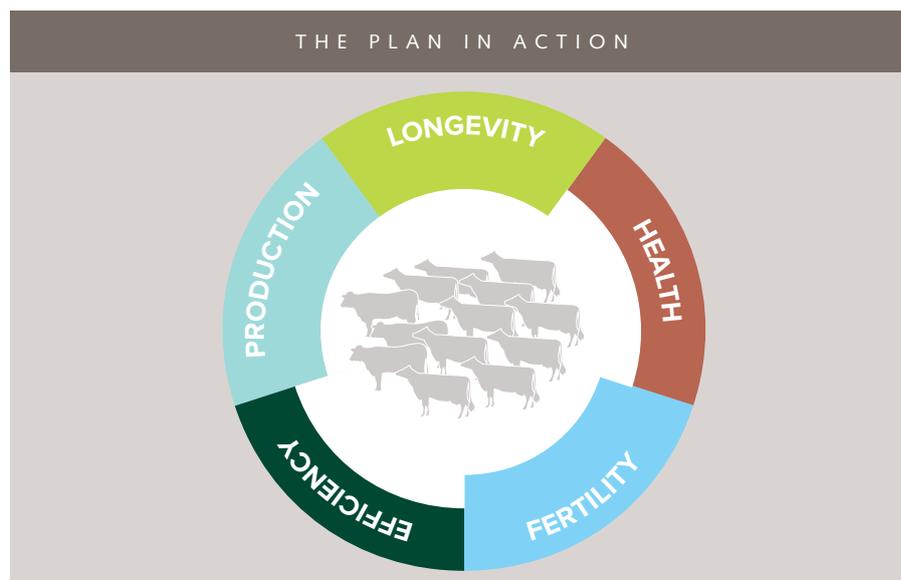


Mark Cash

currently in calf to the New Zealand Friesian sire Dumpling and Jersey sires Kingpin and Manzello. The next crop of bulling heifers are sired by Philosopher, Deluca and Dominic.

The herd will reach its optimum size of 350 cows next spring and Mark then plans to put greater emphasis on breeding for higher solids and will use milk recording to identify the best cows to breed to AI for his replacements.

“Ideally we want to have a replacement rate of around 20%, with a high proportion of voluntary culling, so that we get yields up to 5,500 litres. This will drive efficiency and allow us to reap the full benefit of our cross-bred genetics,” concludes Mark. |



What traits are key to the management of Mark Cash’s herd?

Fertility

Good fertility boosts efficiency and leads to high lifetime production

Longevity

Longevity is strongly related to herd health and fertility

Production

High components and milk solids result in profitable lifetime production