



Chris & Rich Norman

Brothers' grass-based herd is the 2017 NMR/RABDF Gold Cup winner. Team work and a system designed to weather volatility are both key to success.



Herd size:	600
Average yield:	5,536 litres
Milk from forage:	73%
Calving interval:	374 days

Winning team put grass-based systems firmly on the Gold Cup map

Low cost, high calibre herd

Two brothers have made NMR/RABDF Gold Cup history, scooping the top prize with a herd that's managed on a 'low input low output' grass-based system. We spoke to them to find out more about their unit and what the win means to them.

text **Rachael Porter & Karen Wright**

Winning the 2017 NMR/RABDF Gold Cup marks the start of what's set to be an extremely busy year for Herefordshire-based producers Chris and Rich Norman. Not only are the

brothers busy managing two dairy units – and setting up the management system for a third that they've just taken on in neighbouring Gloucestershire – but they've also planning and preparation

for the annual and obligatory Gold Cup winner's open day, scheduled for June, to do.

"But what a problem to have, hey," says Rich, still reeling and excited about

Grazing system: the cows are typically turned out to grass in February





Winning team: (from left to right) Chris and Rich Norman and dairy manager Krisztian Takacs

winning the industry's most coveted trophy, which was presented at Dairy-Tech in early February. "We were shocked by our win, but when you look at the possibility of a block-calving grass-based coming top it shouldn't be such a surprise. We're running a system that focuses on low-cost production to weather market volatility. We manage the herd on a system that's fit for the future."



Increasing the scale of their dairy business and productivity are just two factors that wowed this year's NMR/RABDF Gold Cup judges. Already a successful dairy unit, established by parents Tony and Barbara, progress has been particularly rapid on this 162-hectare farm during the past eight years, in a bid to generate a return to support three families.

New ideas

"We'd also been to college and then worked off the farm and had new ideas and ambitions," says Rich, a Wye College graduate who was then a farm business consultant before coming home to farm. Meanwhile Chris had left Seale-Hayne and spent seven months working in New Zealand on dairy herds.

"We both brought skills back home," explains Rich, admitting that it was something of a Eureka moment when Chris returned from New Zealand and realised that a block calving and paddock grazing system would work well at their unit, based near Pembridge.

The pair set about shifting the all-year-round calving herd, into a tighter autumn block, and maximising the use of the farm's grassland, so that stocking rates could be increased. Cow numbers increased gradually from 150 cows and in 2005 a 50-bale rotary parlour and cubicle housing for 400 cows was added. With light soils and plenty of rainfall, as well as a grazing block close to the farmstead, The Leen is ideal for an autumn calving paddock grazing system. "We're in a rain shadow," adds Chris, "which is why we calve in a block in autumn."

In 2013 the business made its next major leap forward with the addition of a 200,000-bird broiler unit and a 500kW

anaerobic digester. "The poultry gave us another income stream without taking land out of the dairy unit. But it also meant that the muck from the poultry could be fed in the digester. This generates energy for the farm, with 80% sold to the National Grid. A by-product in effect is the digestate that is a fantastic fertiliser for grassland."

Unfortunately, using this digestate on the grassland and the dairy unit's projected stocking rate to accommodate the larger herd size of 600 cross-bred Friesian Jersey cows did not meet organic regulations.

"So, with a heavy heart, we switched to conventional production," says Rich, adding that they had learned a lot from the organic system. "We'd become less reliant on antibiotics, particularly for dry cows, and we were very much in the mindset that prevention is far better than treatment."

And there is clear evidence that this has paid off with somatic cell counts averaging 97,000 cells/ml, down considerably from the average five years ago. "We got a New Zealand vet to train us. He set us the target of 100,000 cells/ml average and laid out protocols to follow covering milking and udder care, milking machine maintenance, milking hygiene and cubicle cleanliness. It all seemed a tall order. But we all followed instructions and, sure enough, within two years we achieved our target."

Conscious of the health risks of running a dairy unit – the farm is in a bTB restricted area – they aim to minimise any risks by using BVD Tag and Test for calves at birth and blood testing them at six months old then monitoring the milking herd using a milk sample. They also vaccinate for IBR, BVD and Leptospirosis.

Skilled staff

The skilled dairy team is one of the Normans' priorities. They know that the dedication of the staff is paramount to the success of their dairy herd, which averages 5,536kg of milk at 4.99% fat and 3.7% protein, with a high health status and a calving index of 374 days. Led by dairy manager Krisztian Takacs, who joined them in 2008, the team of three full-time stock people and two trainee part-time helpers undergoes regular training both on and off the farm. They are all trained to use the fork lift, stock trailer, and in first aid.

"We invite the vet in for more specific training in calving, calf rearing and drying off," adds Chris, who splits his



Feeding time: cross-bred heifer calves from the block-calved herd

time between the milking herd at The Leen, the AD plant and a further 242 hectares of rented land that includes a young stock unit and a spring-calving dairy unit run under a contract-farming agreement.

Regular reviews of work patterns keep the work-life balance in check on the dairy unit, an area Krisztian believes is important to his team.

“Krisztian’s strength is to take new ideas and concepts on board and see them executed on the farm,” says Rich. “He is a perfectionist and he also gets the best out of his team, so time off and a break is important.”

And there’s no denying that workloads can be heavy, particularly during calving, serving, and throughout the grazing season.

Calving pattern

Autumn calving starts on September 4 and continues for 10 weeks. In 2017, 360 cows calved in the first 22 days and they aim to calve 75% of cows in six weeks – which typically means these cows catch the autumn flush of grass.

Heifer calves also take advantage of the autumn conditions and after four days they are turned out in groups of about 40 and fed whole milk twice a day. “We weigh them every six to eight weeks to

make sure they’re keeping on target. We want well-grown heifers that can calve down successfully at 24 months.”

The next peak in workload comes in late November when AI starts. All cows are inseminated with a dairy bull and the aim is to achieve pregnancy rates of 88% at 10 weeks. In 2016, 68% of cows were in calf by 42 days.

Early turnout

Turnout is as early as possible in February and the grazing platform is split into about 50 paddocks that are measured weekly, for about 35 weeks. It’s an eight-kilometre round trip for Krisztian who monitors growth and records the data on AgriNet and from this he gets the weekly grazing plan.

“We aim for 12.5 tonnes of dry matter per hectare,” says Rich, adding that this year, 2017, they will exceed this thanks to the digestate applications and improved grazing management by Krisztian.

“We’re looking to produce 73% of our milk from forage and keep in-parlour feeding to a flat rate of 950kg per cow fed in early lactation. Once cows are indoors, from the end of November, they are fed grass and maize silage. We try not to feed cake in spring but to rely on grass.”

He adds that maximising the use of grass and keeping cost of production ‘sensible’ is the way that they can break-even, even when prices are low as they were in 2016. “We’re seeing milk price volatility as we’ve never seen before, so costs have to be under control.”

Despite a lot of on-farm recording, they are anxious not to get out of kilter with other farms in the area – and also to learn new ideas so they can keep improving their system. This is why they are active members of the Wye Graze discussion group. “This benchmarking is a main driver in our business,” says Rich. “We can see how we’re doing compared with others in the area.”

They also aim to maintain a sustainable dairy system that offers them a good work and life balance. “And we also want a business that will attract the next generation into dairying and I think this kind of block-calved system has the potential to do just that.”

He also thinks that their win could also encourage more producers to take the low-cost, grass-based route. “I think it could result in some people taking a closer look and questioning what they are doing. But block-calved systems are not for every herd, farm or producer. And really, it’s not about the system – it’s about doing it well.” |