

Contrasting systems, both with top-notch management, compete for title

Two more herds go for gold

This is the third, and final, article previewing two more NMR/RABDF Gold Cup finalists. One is a high-yielding Holstein herd and the other is a spring calving, cross-bred herd that's milked once a day. Both are achieving impressive results.

text **Karen Wright**



Darren and Stuart McMurrin, Banbridge, Northern Ireland

An increase in cow numbers of 150 cows and erecting a new cubicle shed did not put these dairying brothers from County Down off entering the 2017 Gold Cup competition. And their consistent business performance and achievements have earned them a place in the final six for the third time in the past four years. Since buying the 222-hectare unit in 2004, herd size has increased from 60 to 410 Holsteins. The original home farm is now used for heifer rearing. Cow health and welfare are the main focus here and Darren and Stuart McMurrin admit that without the commitment of their team, comprising four full-time staff and three evening milkers, they couldn't achieve the herd performance that they aspire to. And this includes producing a level milk supply from healthy, high performance cows.

"We want an average daily output of 40 litres per cow, and to sell the same volume of milk each month," says Darren. Milked three-times-a-day, the herd ranks within NMR's top 1% nationally. Milk from the herd is sold to Lakeland Dairies.

Maximising output

"Land is the limiting factor here in Northern Ireland, so we look to maximise output per cubicle while controlling inputs," says Darren, adding that this is only possible if they adhere to the highest standards of herd management.

Fertility is a key area. "Our pregnancy rate, which takes account of heat detection and conception rates, is 25% compared with an average of 17%."

Strict milking protocols are followed and include pre and post dipping and a cluster



From left to right: Darren McMurrin and wife Laura, with brother Stuart

flush system to help to keep the herd's average somatic cell count on a downward trend. "We use NMR's PCR test to identify any pathogens and determine the best treatment. And any cows with more than three cases of mastitis are culled," explains Darren. The brothers have also switched from sawdust to using sand bedding in the new building to help to control cell counts.

All cows are screened routinely for Johne's through NMR's HerdWise scheme. Strict Johne's control protocols are followed at calving. "Infected cows are identified and their calves are taken at birth and fed pasteurised colostrum to minimise any risk of infection," says Stuart, who looks after day-to-day cow and young stock management.

Feed efficiency is also important in controlling costs. The TMR is based on grass silage with straights. "We want good quality grass so we grow a hybrid

grass for five years and rotate it with winter barley, which is used for wholecrop."

Four crops of silage are taken each year by an 'in house' team. "We do this to make sure we cut grass at exactly the right time," explains Stuart. "And we work with our nutritionist in developing the ration to meet the cows' requirements, aiming to keep the diet as consistent as possible."

Herd facts

System:	All-year-round calving
Herd size:	410 Holstein cows and 300 followers
Production:	11,751kg at 3.81% fat, 3.13% protein
SCC:	175,000 cells/ml
Calving interval:	375 days

David Williams, Northop, Mold, Clwyd



From left to right: David Williams, wife Carol, daughter Vicky, sister in law and employee Sue Pope, with granddaughters Celyn and Eiri

The system at one Clwyd-based unit has changed dramatically since David Williams' father moved to the 120-hectare grassland farm in 1962, particularly during the past 17 years. David, who runs the farm with his wife Carol, daughter Vicky and sister-in-law Sue Pope, switched to a spring calving herd in 2001. A grass-based paddock grazing system replaced the TMR system and he has bred the type of cow – a Friesian Jersey cross – that suits the

block calving and grazing regime. “We also moved to once-a-day milking in 2011,” says David. “This was for two reasons: access to our grazing land, which is split by a busy commuter road, and lifestyle. Sue is the only paid employee and we manage the milking, grass monitoring, calf rearing and record keeping ‘in house’, but we all take some time off,” adds David, who stresses that this system hasn't compromised cow yields, health or profitability.

Turnout is from February to maximise the use of grazed grass



Gold cup presentation at Dairy-Tech

The NMR/RABDF Gold Cup and the NMR Silver Salver will be presented at Dairy-Tech, Stoneleigh Park on February 7, 2018, along with the Chris May Memorial Award and the Lilyhill

Cup for the highest placed Jersey herd in the Gold Cup competition. The presentations will take place on the NMR stand at 4pm followed with cheese and wine refreshments.

Herd facts

System:	Spring-calving herd
Herd size:	275 cross-bred Friesian Jersey cows and 171 followers
Production:	3,850kg of milk (350kg milk solids) at 5.21% fat 3.87% protein
SCC:	192,000 cells/ml
Calving interval:	370 days

All cows are dried off by December before calving starts early February. Once calved, cows are turned out. Breeding starts on May 10 and AI is used for the first six weeks, with a submission rate of more than 90%.

“Our target is to achieve fewer than 10% not in calf by 70 days – in 2016 it was 9%, with 75% in calf at six weeks.”

Grass harvesters

David describes himself primarily as a grass farmer. “Our target is to utilise 85% of grass grown, which in 2016 was 13 tonnes of dry matter per hectare, and to provide cows with an energy rich grass with 12ME of leafy material.”

The 10cm of top soil covering 45 metres of sand favours a long growing season. “It's perfect as long as it doesn't dry up during summer – we love wet weather.” In a good grass-growing season they will only need to supplement rations with 200kg per cow of palm kernel extract. In a bad year this could double. As little grass as possible is taken out of the grazing platform for silage. “As soon as you cut it you lose quality and quantity and you incur costs right down the line.”

Milk is sold to Arla. “We'd like to achieve more than 350kg of solids off grass and some silage. We're moving to six-times-a-year recording so we can monitor progress with official records and get a spring calving index. It will be interesting to see how we rank alongside other spring calving herds,” adds David.

He says that a good milk price keeps the business ‘cash rich’ and returns a good profit. “A good margin, with cash in the business, makes the business robust and better able to cope with the fluctuating milk prices that have become the norm.”