

Contrasting herds get Gold Cup judges' votes

Gold in their sights



This is the second of three articles that previews two 2017 NMR/RABDF Gold Cup finalists. One is an autumn calving herd, managed on a grass-based system, and the other is a high-profile Holstein herd. Their business plans and a commitment to the industry have impressed the judging panel.

text **Karen Wright**

Chris and Rich Norman, Pembridge, Herefordshire



Chris and Rich Norman, *The Leen*

This 162-hectare unit has been developed during the past 12 years to generate a return for three families. The 150-cow year-round calving organic herd has evolved into a 600-cow cross-bred autumn calving herd, managed on a paddock grazing system.

"We look to maximise the farm's grass production," says Rich Norman. "We aim for 12.5 tonnes of dry matter per hectare and to produce 73% of our milk from forage, keeping parlour feeding to a flat rate of 950kg per cow fed in early lactation."

The grazing platform is split into around 50 paddocks that are measured weekly. Data is recorded on AgriNet and

generates the herd's weekly grazing plan.

The light loam over gravel soils, that run down to the River Arrow, and the farm's 711mm rainfall makes *The Leen* an ideal set up for an autumn-calving paddock grazing system. "We're in a rain shadow," adds Chris, "which is why we're autumn calving."

Broiler unit added

In 2013 the business added a 200,000-bird broiler unit and a 500kW anaerobic digester. The poultry provided the family with another income stream. But it also meant that the muck from the poultry could be fed into the digester. This generates energy for the farm, with 80% sold to the National Grid. A by-product is digestate, which is a fantastic grassland fertiliser, according to the brothers.

Unfortunately, using this digestate on the grassland and the unit's projected stocking rate did not meet organic regulations so the family has switched to conventional production.

Rich admits that they learned a lot from the organic system. "We'd become less reliant on antibiotics, particularly for dry cows, and we remain in the

mindset that prevention is far better than treatment."

The dairy team is led by dairy manager Krisztian Takacs, who joined them in 2008. Staff development is part of the ethos on this unit and everyone undergoes regular training.

"We invite the vet in for specific training in calving, calf rearing and drying off," adds Chris. And this pays off in helping to maintain a tight calving and breeding pattern. This year (2017) 360 cows calved in the first 22 days and they aim to calve 75% of cows in six weeks. This typically means that these cows catch the autumn flush of grass.

All cows are served with dairy bull semen and the aim is to achieve pregnancy rates of 88% at 10 weeks. In 2016, 68% of cows were in calf by 42 days. They look to breed a uniform-sized herd. "We also want cows that are black, with black feet that are generally tougher and more suited to our system."

The dairy unit is benchmarked through the Wye Graze discussion group. "This is a main driver in our business," adds Rich. "We can compare our performance with others in the area."

Black cows, with black feet, are favoured at the Leen



Herd facts

System:	Autumn-calving herd
Herd size:	600 cross-bred Friesian Jersey cows, plus 269 followers
Production:	5,536kg of milk, at 4.99% fat, 3.7% protein
SCC:	97,000 cells/ml
Calving interval:	374 days

DJ & S Tomlinson, Bilsborrow Hall Farm, Preston, Lancashire



From left: David, Sheila, Eleanor and James Tomlinson

Cattle breeding is a major part of this dairy business, with 50 heifers and 25 stock bulls sold each year, but James Tomlinson, who farms in partnership with his wife Eleanor and parents David and Sheila, admits that milk production and milk sales come first.

They supply Pakezza Dairies at Rochdale, a privately-owned company that has expanded rapidly, almost tripling its number of producer suppliers during the past 12 months.

Crucial to the success of this herd is the team of staff that James and Eleanor have

built up. This comprises Ella and Tom, who have been with them for more than five years, as well as Michael and part-time relief milker Alan.

The team's work is complemented by that of their specialist dairy vet, from Leonard, Lambert and May, and follows a preventative regime towards metabolic and disease risks. The herd is also vaccinated for BVD, IBR, Johne's and leptospirosis and the herd is screened regularly for infectious diseases including Johne's. There are currently no positives for any of these diseases in

Tomlinson's Bilsrow young stock



Gold cup winner 2017

The winner of the 2017 NMR RABDF Gold Cup and the runner up, who receives the NMR Silver Salver, will be

announced at the RABDF's Dairy-Tech event, at Stoneleigh Park on February 7, 2018.

Herd facts

System:	All-year-round calving
Herd size:	270 cows and 300 young stock, including young bulls
Yield:	11,386kg of milk, at 4.27% fat and 3.16% protein
SCC:	98,000 cells/ml
Calving interval:	377 days

the herd and James is keen to make sure that protocols, including maintaining a closed herd, are adhered to, in order to maintain this status.

The farm team is fully trained in monitoring and dealing with lameness and mastitis. "I regard these two problems in a similar way," explains James. "We check for lameness daily, as cows come into the parlour, and, as with mastitis, it is dealt with immediately."

Confidence in genomics

To provide replacements and sale stock, all heifers are inseminated with sexed semen. And 80% of inseminations are with genomically proven sires. James is growing increasingly confident in genomic testing as a way of increasing the herd's genetic gain. A balanced approach has always been taken to sire selection at Bilsborrow Farm. "We want to breed milky healthy cows of average size and with the strength to remain in the herd for at least five – and preferably more – lactations," says James.

Thanks to consistent breeding goals and good management, performance of the herd continues to move in the right direction. They are currently achieving a replacement rate of 22%, heifers are calving at 24 months old and 27% of cows are in their fourth lactation or more. Around 40% of cows are in calf by 100 days. Looking forward, James wants to see longevity improve further and he is working with his vet to reduce antibiotic use. Using a selective dry cow therapy programme, 30% of the herd does not receive antibiotics at drying off.

Herd numbers will increase gradually on this 160-hectare unit, but James is mindful of the need to look after the farm's resources and soil health is a priority. "We want to realise the potential of the farm and the herd while, at the same time, controlling costs," he adds.