Careful management realises genetic potential

Longer-life 'milky' cows

In discussions about how to achieve high lifetime production, Gert, Gerrit and Nico Lekkerkerker have plenty to bring to the table. In The Netherlands they have 35 cows that have passed the 100-tonnes mark. They say that, as well as nutrition and management, breeding plays an important role.

text **Wichert Koopman**

Milk capacity has always been one of the key drivers in the Lekkerkerker family's breeding plans. This not only ensures high daily production per cow, but it also contributes to high lifetime production. Their herd, based at Harmelen in the centre of the Netherlands, is home to several lifetime production 'winners'. Average lifetime production fluctuates at around 60,000kg of milk and already 35 cows have smashed through to 100,000-litres-of-milk barrier. Two cows have even passed the 10,000kg-of-fat-and-protein mark. And the Lekkerkerker's secret for success? They says that there's no one specific thing. "But for years we have been breeding for healthy, durable cows that produce a lot of milk and have good fat and protein content. So that's certainly played a role," says Gerrit.

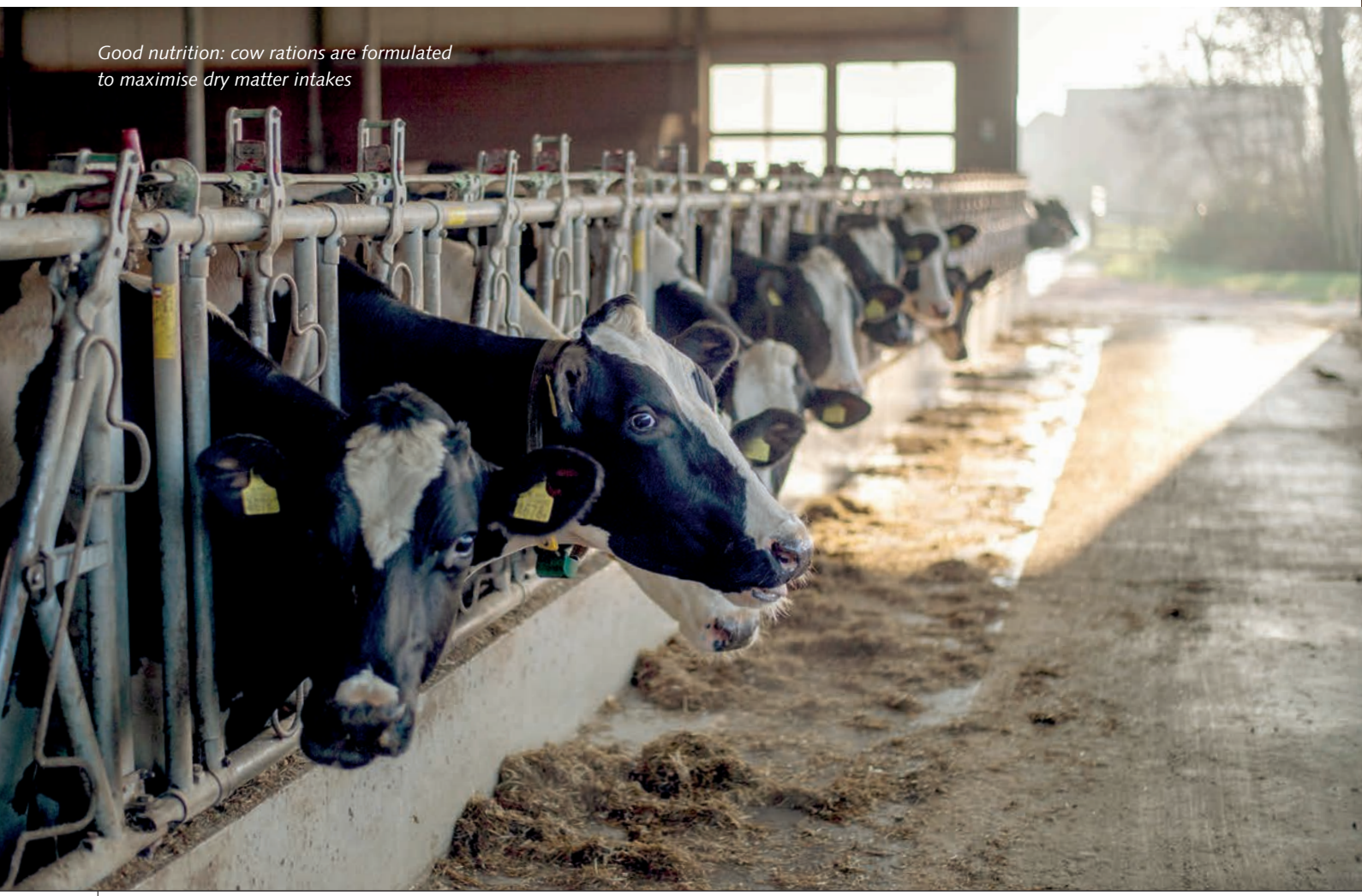
"We also pay a lot of attention to nutrition – we don't scrimp on feed costs. And we also check on the cows regularly, to be sure that everything is as it should be. Sick cows get plenty of TLC."

Gerrit and brother Nico Lekkerkerker, together with Gerrit's son Gert, work hard to manage the 150-cow herd, plus 75 followers, with great attention to detail.

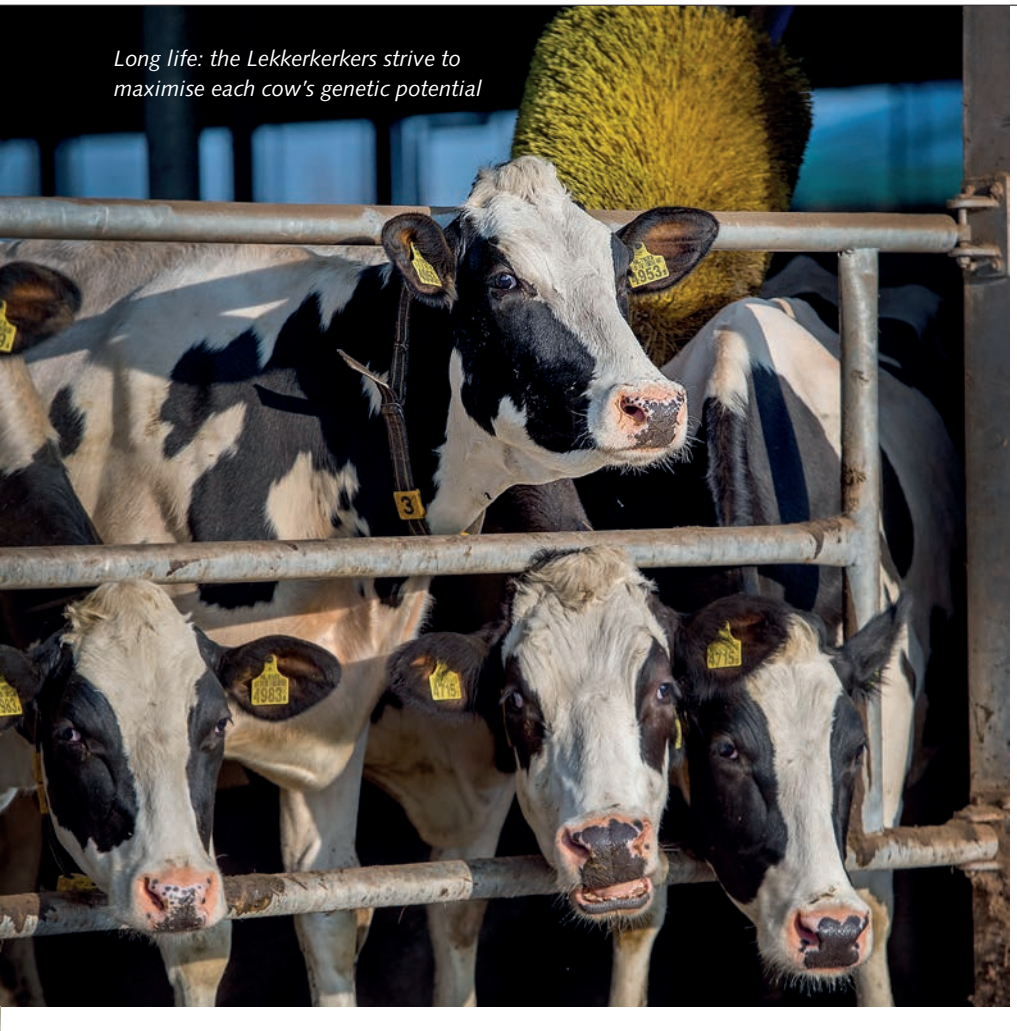
Grass-based system

Averaging 11,817kg of milk, the herd is run on a grass-based system. The unit, which was recently visited by a delegation of UK producers, comprises 70 hectares of grassland. This is grazed and cut for grass silage. Maize silage is bought in, just like brewers' grains and concentrates.

"The idea that pastures can't support high-yielding cows doesn't apply to our unit," says Gerrit. "With a grazing platform of more than 50 hectares, there



Good nutrition: cow rations are formulated to maximise dry matter intakes



Long life: the Lekkerkerkers strive to maximise each cow's genetic potential

Gerrit, Gert and Nico Lekkerkerker

Milk capacity is one of the key drivers in the Lekkerkerker family's breeding plan.

Herd size:	**150 cows**
Followers:	**75**
Average yield:	**11,871 litres (4.15% fat & 3.49% protein)**
Unit size:	**70 hectares of grassland**
100-tonne cows:	**35**

is plenty of room for grazing the cattle and maximising milk from forage."

The cows are grazed both day and night during the spring, summer and early autumn, and a ration comprising maize silage and brewers' grains is also fed as a buffer. Concentrates are fed to yield though the parlour. "Grazing – for as many months as possible – is good for the cows, particularly their legs and feet, and I believe that this contributes to their longer-than-average life span," says Gerrit. "And if you make sure that young grass is always available, you can easily produce milk from grazing," adds Nico.

Young sires

Ensuring cows have plenty of milking capacity has always been a priority for the Utrecht-based producers. "In the past, true production bulls ran short of other features, but in recent years, it is much easier to include feet and legs and health characteristics when selecting sires, without having to worry about production characteristics," says Gert. "CRV's breeding policy is bearing fruit and more sires are coming through that offer the complete breeding package."

Cows and heifers are 'matched' with sires using CRV's mating program SireMatch. And InSire bulls are often on the AI list. "Young sires, on average, have the highest breeding values and we would like to use this to further increase the genetic merit of our cows," says Gerrit. "Behind all InSire bulls are good sire and dams who have been tested reliably in CRV's breeding programme. So we are confident that they will meet their genomic values when daughter proofs become available."

Among the current sires in use on the Lekkerkerker's herd are Delta Atlantic, Delta G-Force, Peak Chuck, Delta Concert and Newhouse Jorben.

The fact that the cows have the genetic potential to produce a lot of milk is evident from the performance of the surplus heifers sold to other produces. "They often perform better with their new owners than they do with us!"

More milk

Another measurement, genetic potential, was behind the decision to move to three-times-a-day milking during the winter housing period. "This helps us to keep cell counts under control and it also stimulates milk production," says Gert. "The heifers, in particular, produce more milk. It's like removing the brakes – there's nothing to stop them."

When the cows go out again in spring, the Lekkerkerker's switch back to milking twice a day. It doesn't work well when cows are out at grass.

A long life, as well as high milk production, is required for high lifetime production. "And we assume that every heifer has the potential to live a long and productive life – and grow old," says Gerrit. "So we give her the best chance. We do not cut corners."

Close monitoring

Using monthly milk recording, the Lekkerkerkers closely monitor the performance of their cows.

The high genetic production capacities make it possible to produce a lot of milk per cow, but it also requires targeted management. For example, with a ration high in grass, the energy available to fresh-calved cows requires close attention.

"We're looking for high dry matter intakes and, when the cows are housed, we make sure that the ration in front of them is always fresh and appetising, and that there's plenty of it," says Gerrit.

"And when we finished work in the evening, we always throw a few bales of hay along the feed fence. They are all finished in the morning," adds Nico.

To make top quality hay, the partners pay a lot of attention to field work during the summer.

"The cows always want to eat this hay, even if they're not feeling particularly well," says Gerrit.

"It helps to stimulate appetite and good rumen function. And it improves the utilisation of the ration. This is another factor in helping us to realise high lifetime production." |