



Shropshire-based producer and award-winning columnist Roger Evans is grateful for Holstein bloodlines and particularly their temperament

## Perfect **timing**

I was thinking back to what I had written in my previous column, about calf rearing and how heifers often had a hard time on a winter diet of poor hay. Somewhere in the dark recesses of my mind (of which there are many), I seem to remember some stuff we learnt at college.

There was some research on heifer rearing that had shown that they performed better as cows if they had varying diets when they were reared. I can't remember the detail now, but I do recall that it was all described as high or low diets' and it should alternate to give the best results. These days it is not possible to rear your heifers to calve at two years old if you want to include a period within that two years where the heifer is fed a poor diet. With hindsight, and cynicism, doesn't that high/low management diet exactly describe what happened anyway?

'Low' diet was provided by the poor hay on offer in winter and the 'high' would happen when the heifers were turned out to grass.

At about this time there was another important step forward in terms of improving the heifers we reared – temperament. For years I had used a well-known Friesian bull and had been extremely pleased with the results – really pleased. But eventually the time came to change sire. Inadvertently, I selected a bull that produced small, fat heifers that were slow milking and bad tempered. Slow milking and bad tempered is not a good combination. I can still remember that bull's name. His semen should never have seen the inside of a flask.

Success in life is often all about timing and I moved to using Holstein bulls. Some of the first-cross Holstein Friesian cows that I bred were, to be honest, the best cows I ever bred. But even before those heifers were born I went to a farm sale one day, just to have a look.

There was an imported in-calf heifer that was the first pure Holstein I had ever seen. There was only the one and I decided to buy her. Others must have thought the same because she topped the sale, by some distance. She had 13 calves for me, as did the heifer that she was carrying, but I didn't get another heifer out of either of them. They were both what I would, today, call 'extreme' cows. They had bones sticking out everywhere. But they were so quiet.

I used to sell my calves at Shrewsbury market and visit the dairy section while I waited. You had to be careful as you walked behind the cows and heifers because some would try to kick you as you passed. I can remember a farmer telling me: "You don't want to be kicked milking a cow, you don't get any more money for her than for the others."

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