



STAFFS. HERD MAKES GOLD CUP FINAL

Staffordshire producer Arthur Palmer from Norbury has entered this year's NMR/RABDF Gold Cup for the first time and has made it to the final six with what he describes as a simple and uncomplicated dairy system.



Sally Lea and Arthur Palmer

Arthur's main aim in running his 400-cow herd is to maximise forage use and achieve high yields and his cows are certainly delivering the goods.

The system is based on block calving and extensive use of grazing to achieve average milk yields of more than 10,000kg.

“We want a simple system where we can keep costs to a minimum,” he explains. “Block calving allows us to focus our management efforts and make full use of grazing and labour. We run an intensive system in the winter and a New Zealand system in the spring. This also suits our milk contract which is encouraging autumn/winter milk production.”

Up until 2006 this herd was 100% Holstein and bred for yields but Arthur wanted cows better suited to his simple, grazing based system and able to convert forage efficiently so now the herd is 30% crossbred. Taking advantage of the breed’s excellent health traits, Norwegian Red sires have been used on Holstein cows with 90 crossbred heifers available this August and a further 100 calves in the pipeline. Fleckvieh sires are used on crossbred cows to maintain hybrid vigour and produce a three way cross. These will then be bred back to Holstein.



“Crossbreds really suit our system as they produce the milk without the problems. Fertility is certainly better, with fewer days to first oestrus and a higher conception rate. Longevity has definitely improved. We have several cows in their sixth lactation happily giving over 10,000kg.”

Heifers are reared to calve at under two years old on a low cost system and Arthur is quick to acknowledge the contribution of his 'second in command' Sally Lea who takes control of calf rearing. "We get calves off to a good start and then they go out to grass at five or six months old. They aren't housed again until they enter the milking herd.

"We serve cows to dairy bulls for the first six weeks of the service period to ensure we get a tight group of heifer calves which will calve in at the start of the calving block. Calving starts in August with the majority of cows calved by October."

Cows are housed from late September in cubicles and are TMR fed with concentrate in the parlour. Arthur, along with his main herdsman Leszek and workers Eddie and Dan share the twice a day milking through a 30:60 parlour.

Turnout is usually in mid February with buffer feeding stopped once the grass growth increases, usually by the end of March. "Grazing management can be a challenge with 400 cows but we have invested in over two miles of sleeper tracks so cows can get to the grazing easily," adds Arthur. "We also monitor the grass carefully. Sally measures it weekly with a plate meter to calculate a grazing wedge.

"We're also committed to regular reseeding with modern high sugar grass mixtures. New reseeds typically produce an extra two litres per cow per day compared to old leys".

Health and welfare management is a priority for Arthur who sells milk under a Tesco contract. Mobility scoring is used to pick up problem cows and they have a routine monthly foot trimming visit. The herd is routinely vaccinated for IBR, BVD and leptospirosis. Calves are screened for BVD using Tag and Test and cows screened for Johne's using NMR's Herdwise service.

To help with the busy calving period, a vet student from Nottingham University will be based at the farm in August and September.

The system is delivering the goods. In the year to September 2014 – the Gold Cup qualifying period – cows averaged 10063kg milk at 4.02% fat and 3.26% protein. Somatic cell counts

were 171,000/ml and the calving interval was 402 days while replacement rate is low at around 15% thanks to the longevity of the crossbred cows.

Looking ahead, Arthur aims to maintain yields but increase yield from forage above the current 4000litres. The calving block will also be tightened to just 16 weeks over the next few years.

“As long as we pay attention to detail, learn from our mistakes and try to improve our management in every aspect of the business each year then I am confident we can continue to move forwards.”

This year’s judges are RABDF Chairman, former Gold Cup winner and Lancashire-based Jersey producer Ian Macalpine, NMR Board member and Isle of Anglesey-based producer Trevor Lloyd; and 2012 Gold Cup winner from Worcestershire, Mike Miller.

The winner of the 2015 NMR/RABDF Gold Cup and the runner-up, who receives the NMR Silver Salver, will be announced at 4pm on the NMR stand at the Livestock Event, NEC Birmingham on July 8.

Unit facts

- 400 cows – 30% crossbred moving to 100%
- Block autumn calving to make full use of grazing
- Heifers calving at under two years old
- Milk sold to Muller Wiseman (Tesco)
- Targeting over 40% of milk from forage
- Excellent fertility – 52% in calf by 100 days in milk