

Organic Dairy Calf Initiative

Case study 2: Horton House Farm, Devizes, Wiltshire

A low cost system – beset by bTB – but still delivering a good life for its calves...

The Rider system of dairying and calf rearing is, to say the least, innovative and pioneering.

Jonny Rider milks 400 cows once a day, calving in a tight block between 20 March and the end of April. The herd is a mix of Jersey, Friesian and Montbelliard, with home reared teams of bulls doing the majority of the serving. New blood is introduced through AI, on around a quarter of the herd each year. No concentrates are fed at all, and the herd yields around 4,000litres/year.

A further 170 cows and heifers do all the calf rearing. Cows and calves are mothered up inside, then move rapidly out to grass and calves stay on their nurse cows until October or early November, by which time they are well grown.

A number of approaches have been tried: for three years, all calves were reared on the heifers, so that they only entered the dairy herd in their second lactation. However, Jonny has now moved to using older cows, as heifers tended to lose too much condition when suckled by two or three calves – compared to once a day milking – and therefore did not perform well in their second lactation. He notes, however, how confident and calm these heifers were once they entered the dairy.

Getting cows and calves to bond can be a problem and he has invested recently in some self-locking yokes to help with this in the first few days. There are clear breed differences, with the Montbelliards being the easiest to train, and around 10% of the Friesians refusing to take calves at all. He often starts them off in groups, with high calf numbers to overwhelm the cows, and to make sure that the freshly calved cow's udder never gets too tight and sore, which can rapidly lead to rejection, He will then split the group down. He finds that cows often have a favourite calf which will monopolise the front two teats. If this calf is removed, the cow will often reject the other two, so understanding the cow, calf and group dynamic becomes crucial.

When grass is running short in the autumn, the calves are weaned, and the cows dried off for an extended period before their next calving in the spring. Weaning takes place using an electric dividing fence which allows continued contact for a while but prevents suckling. The fence is gradually moved away from the cows and fresh grazing is provided to encourage the calves to begin to explore further away.

The benefits of the system are significant – both in practical and philosophical terms. Jonny can be much tougher on which cows are kept in the milking herd and his replacement rate is very low. Despite losing 130 animals to bTB in 2009, his replacement rate has only been 25% – and it normally averages around 12%! Mortality on farm is higher than would normally be expected, due to the long term retention of older cows for suckling. And this exceptionally low cost system delivers a six month strong calf at a cost of only around £80 for a bull, £120 for a heifer. This figure includes all grazing and vet/med costs, but no labour or other overheads.

Around 30% of the bull calves are sold for breeding and the rest are destined for beef. Around 10% of the calves are very Jersey and these will go for processing at a very young age (a couple of months). With such a big bTB problem, a plentiful supply of heifers to deal with the unpredictable is helpful, and the rest will be sold to other dairy herds.

Jonny's motivation for pioneering this approach seems as personal as it is practical: "I have three young children," he says. "How could I explain to them after all the delight of a new calf's arrival that we will now shoot it? I did shoot some calves during foot and mouth; I had no option, but I still feel guilty about it."

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