



## **Herd Health Management**

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**Holstein Journal – July 2001, p68**

### **Are you ready for the starting blocks?**

Vet Neil Howie feels that now is good time to step back and have a look at the fundamental aspects of the way you manage your herd. He also suggests a strategy aimed at keeping you, your staff and your cows in the best of shape.

*"There is a tide in the affairs of men, which, taken at the flood, leads on to fortune."*

*From Julius Caesar by William Shakespeare*

The period of desperately low prices has been bad enough, but it only compounds the depression resulting from the heavily bureaucratic nightmare of modern farming, coupled with the constant jibing that farmers are over-subsidised abusers of the countryside.

The conventional consultants answer to this scenario is to expand out of trouble. I'm pretty convinced that, for many, this is a recipe for disaster. Expansion in numbers without investment in suitable infrastructure just means more wastage. Expansion without quality labour means the boss runs round like a mad thing for more hours every day. Quality labour often ends up taking more out of the job than the boss, and if you look at most of the big units we service, there are less cows supporting each family drawing off them than on many of our family farms. There is a big issue about the supply of quality labour, as less rural housing is now occupied by people with any farming interest.

More and more of our clients feel they are not in control of their daily existence, let alone their destiny and there is nothing more depressing than feeling forever out of control.

### **I want to offer a plan for dairy farmers to regain control of their time and lives.**

If you look at great stockmen, like great sportsmen and great orators, you will see they always appear to have time. You can never tell if a good stockman is having a good or a bad day, they always have the same controlled manner. Good farm business managers make time to manage their businesses, and that doesn't happen if they are running around doing all the chores.

So, to be in control, you need to be a time manager, and to be a time manager you have to cut down on trying to do too many things at the same time.

How can you do this with a herd of dairy cows? You block calve. I don't mean the '10 weeks in the spring calving, do-it all-from-grass, low yield' block calving. I believe most of this journal's readers believe in breeding cows that produce, and looking after those producers so that they can express their potential. I mean three-monthly blocks of calving, with two quarterly blocks of serving in between.

Let's say, for example, you calve in March, April and May. You would then serve in June, July and August. Calve again in September, October and November, and serve again in December, January and February.

One of the great discussions of the day is about the importance of calving interval. In an all-year-round calving pattern, cows which slip do not stand out as problems. In a once-a-year block, they do, because they end up as culls. In my proposal, good cows will simply move from one block to the next if they slip. A three-month carry over is quite reasonable for a good cow, because she will simply milk on. If she doesn't deserve the chance, she isn't good enough anyway.

The major disincentive to block calving is that it is seen as cow-wasteful. Too many cows which fail to conceive in the selected service period end up as culls. My experience with serial block calving herds is that they are cow saving, as the discipline of managing groups of cows allows better dry and fresh calved feeding management, which in turn leads to better fertility management.

Overall health and fertility management improves as the predetermined start and stop dates for drying off, calving and serving lead to focussed attention on management of body condition and close-to-calving feeding. Because of the definition of calving periods, mastitis management tends to be more considered, with decisions made on the information available rather than responding to the clinical situation. Health management becomes proactive rather than reactive and the relationship with the vet should be more constructive and cost-effective. Cow wastage should decline – it's a win for everybody.

How good are you at rearing and retaining young cows? On a monthly basis, calculate:

?? Of the heifer calves born alive 27 months ago, how many have calved?

?? Of the heifers that started their first lactation 27 months ago, how many are still with you and have had their third calf?

These figures will show how effective you are at rearing heifers and retaining young cows in the herd. Are there any seasonal differences? If there are, build this information into your choice of block calving months.

The farming press is full of advice to 'extend the grazing season'. Most exponents of the system block calve in the spring, have modest yields with minimal concentrate usage and believe they have the wrong cows to do it with!

Well, you've got the cows you've got, and have spent years breeding them. You don't want to crossbreed them, and I don't think you need to. Regardless of which two sets of three months you chose as your calving periods, you will end up with one bunch of cows which are safely in-calf in the spring and can graze early without detrimental effect on fertility, and another group which can safely exploit autumn grass. One group of fresh-calved and serving cows will need looking after with a carefully balanced ration in the spring, the other in the autumn. It's what you'd like to do now but, with an all-year-round calving herd, it's easy to excuse yourself from doing so because there are always enough cows that don't deserve the extra to say that it's too extravagant to treat the fresh calved ones properly. If you don't think it, the consultant will tell you anyway!

So you end up with two herds. One needs intensive management through its calving and servicing period but, while you are doing that, the other is freewheeling through late lactation and into the dry period. Imagine only having to manage half your herd, because in effect that's what happens. Sounds like a good lifestyle choice.

You can dedicate your most skilled hours to the cows which need the most attention. You are not looking after calving cows at the same time as looking for bullers and trying to serve cows. You have decent blocks of dry cows and fresh cows to feed properly and, maybe best of all, you have blocks of similar-ages calves and heifers to rear. It's so much easier to get well-grown, weight-for-age heifers when they can be grouped tightly.

OK, there are some down sides. What about milk supply patterns? I suspect the effect on the tank level will not be huge, but you will need your own quota supply profiled to check that out relative to your choice of calving months. You will need adequate calving accommodation, but if you haven't already got it, then maybe you should be looking at that even if you don't block calve! You will need discipline; if your best cow comes bulling two days after the end of the service window, can you bear not to serve her for three months? If she's that good, it's an ideal time to flush her, otherwise wait. She will be fine in the next service group.

You will need the whole team on side. They have to believe in the righteousness of the system to make it work. A bad week of dry cow management or heat detection will hurt, but it does anyway, it just doesn't show up as much on an all-year-round system.

The upside is that staff will become motivated to make the system work because they identify with the advantages of their own time management. They can become overwhelmed with the sheer endless drudge of calving, heat detection, calf rearing etc, never finishing what there is to do. There is nothing like a break in routine to freshen up everybody's attitude. Seasons become identifiable and measurable. Targets can be set and checked off. Dates can be set for the start of calving, start of heat detection and the end of serving. People have something to look forward to. People stop trying to do everything at once, and do specific thing at specific times. They regain control of their lives. There is a buzz of excitement in actively managing the cows. There is a future, a future of great things.

### **All-year-round calving**

(demand management – never finish what has to be done)

- ?? 150 cows
- ?? three calvings each week
- ?? six services per week
- ?? heat detection every day
- ?? nine heifer calves on the bucket all the time
- ?? always different age groups of heifers
- ?? always heifers to serve
- ?? always far-off and close-up dry cows
- ?? fresh calved cows always have to go in the high group
- ?? early spring and late autumn grazing puts stress on fresh calved and served cows
- ?? buffer grazing overfeeds late lactation cows
- ?? vaccine windows likely to be missed and vaccine to be wasted
- ?? manpower constantly stretched, doing all things all the time
- ?? high demand for quality support staff
- ?? the routine is never ending, the job is never finished
- ?? mental exhaustion

### **Serial block calving**

(command management – prioritisation of what can be done)

- ?? 150 cows
- ?? six calvings a week for 12 weeks, twice
- ?? 12 services per week for 12 weeks, twice
- ?? heat detection for 12 weeks, twice

- ?? 18 calves per week on the bucket for less than 12 weeks, twice
- ?? defined groups of heifer calves
- ?? defined groups of heifers to serve
- ?? defined groups of dry cows can be fed accurately
- ?? groups of fresh-calved cow can be kept on special diets
- ?? groups of 'safely in-calf' can extend graze in spring and autumn
- ?? defined groups of fresh calved cows can be fed balanced rations
- ?? vaccine routines can be targeted to groups and used efficiently
- ?? manpower targeted to specific functions
- ?? quality staff targeted to specific areas, so less demand on support staff
- ?? the job is broken up into windows of activity, each with a start and an end
- ?? mental stimulation