

The Benefits of Classification

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Classification has long been used as a descriptive guide to the conformation of an individual animal, but what exactly does it entail and how does it benefit the breeder? Tim Johnston, who farms in the north of the Isle of Man, has recently invested in a new set up including a new parlour and cubicle house. The cows bought in to boost numbers came from two pedigree herds and Tim has graded up all his existing stock in order to increase the value of his *Barrule* herd. He also started official milk recording. *Barrule* Holsteins have therefore progressed from non pedigree to pedigree, and then to being milk recorded, all of which costs money. Looking at adding value to his herd whilst minimising costs and maximising margins, especially as a tenant farmer where cows are his biggest asset, Tim puts some questions to the CDI's Alison Maddrell about the benefit of classifying.

What is Classification?

The CDI Classification service is an independent assessment of the physical strengths and weaknesses of your herd. It is an opportunity to see your cows through fresh eyes and look at each one individually to help identify areas to focus on in a breeding program. Breeding in good functional conformation enhances the health, welfare and longevity of the cows. The best individuals and families in a herd can be flagged up using this scheme.

How does it work?

A field officer visits the farm and will see all heifers not previously presented for inspection along with any cows a breeder feels may benefit from re-evaluation. 17 different traits are given a descriptive value on a scale of 1 to 9, with 1 and 9 being the opposite extremes of each physical trait. Four composite areas of the animal are then scored out of 100. These are currently Rump, Dairy Strength, Feet & Legs and Mammary. Using these composites, the Final Score is calculated using different weightings applied to each, with Mammary carrying 40%, Feet & Legs 25%, Dairy Strength 25% and Rump 10%.

Point ranges make up the overall classification with 90 or more points described as Excellent, 85 to 89 Very Good, 80 to 84 Good Plus, 75 to 79 Good, 65 to 74 Fair and 64 or less Poor.

Some management traits are also recorded when scoring heifers. These are Temperament, Ease of Milking and Locomotion, which go towards a sire's UK Type proof along with the physical information. Body Condition is also recorded as a research trait.

Is there any preparation required before a visit?

If you record with the Cattle Information Service then no additional information is needed to identify the animals. The animals put forward need to be available for individual inspection on concrete and the registration certificates are required for stamping at the end of an inspection but that is all that's required. The classifiers do not need animals to be wash or clipped, led on a halter or full of milk.

How much does it cost?

A Classification visit costs £6 per animal. There is a minimum cost of £60 (plus VAT) which covers up to 10 animals. For this, a breeder receives an official CDI classification score for each animal inspected, endorsed by the classifier on all relevant registration certificates. A full assessment report on each animal is also provided giving detailed linear breakdowns.

The cost may be reduced by joining the COMPLETE scheme, where a single monthly fee per cow in the herd covers two classification visits a year at your convenience. The package also includes milk recording, pedigree registrations and passport applications using a web based program meaning that no additional software costs are incurred.

Are there any herd management benefits?

Identifying stronger individuals most suited for breeding replacements and the ability to focus on which areas need most improvement are distinct advantages of classifying a herd. Improved longevity is a major consideration for today's industry and breeding for better udder traits, feet & legs and locomotion plays a large part in this.

The ability to run detailed Type information through the Centre for Dairy Information's WebMate program can help with sire choice and correctional mating. This mating program matches up every cow with a sire list of the users choice, whether using specific minimum criteria or what's already in the pot, to give the best corrective mating based on the Breed Ideal. As a web based program, this can be run repeatedly at a breeder's convenience using the latest herd and sire information via a PIN protected login.

Will it add value to my cows?

The most obvious added value to a herd is after any areas of weakness have been identified, action can be taken to manage and improve them. Healthy cows that walk well with an udder that will see them through several lactations with no problems last longer and produce more milk over a lifetime.

Evidence that heifers scored highly for Mammary and Feet & Legs went on to complete more lactations than lower scored animals and at higher production levels was published in the April journal. In an industry of diminishing returns, this is valuable information, especially given the cost of replacements.

A secondary consideration, but still an important factor, is the market value of stock. Sale figures show that classified Holsteins average over 100% more than non-classified milking animals. This improves the chance of increasing farm revenue when surplus heifers are sold. Friesian, Jersey, Guernsey and Shorthorn animals are also assessed by the CDI classifiers.

How do I get started?

Simply book a visit by calling Jackie Clark on 01923 695208