

100-pound herds: What are the secrets to their success?

R. Tom Bass for *Progressive Dairyman*

Over the years I've had the privilege of working with and visiting a number of herds across the country that were producing 100 pounds of milk or more per cow per day. What are the secrets of these herds with a bulk tank average that mirrors high-group production levels for many herds? The author's recurring observations, similar to those recently reported by Dr. Nigel Cook for some elite Wisconsin herds, are discussed below.

1 *The vast majority milk 3X.* A recent DairyMetrics review of DHIA records for approximately 9,800 Holstein herds revealed that the odds of achieving a 30,000-pound-or-greater RHA were 15 times greater if a herd milks 3X instead of 2X. The production advantages of increased milking frequencies are well-researched and well-proven. As long as a dairy has the labor force and parlor downtime to facilitate it, and cow time budgets aren't negatively impacted (cows are still able to maintain adequate daily lying times), switching from 2X to 3X milking is usually a profitable means of increasing herd milk production.

2 *Cows, cow comfort and health are constant priorities.* In these herds, producers see to it that cows do what

they are supposed to do. According to Dr. Gordie Jones, "high-producing cows don't just stand around." That declaration is abundantly reinforced through observation of these herds. Cows are milked; they drink, eat and lie down. Cow health is good, particularly in fresh cows, and managers' astute cow observation catches problems early, whereupon appropriate intervention is employed to quickly correct the issue.

Because cows are healthy and well-managed, herd reproductive performance is generally above-average as well. Visiting these herds consistently reinforces the idea that cow comfort is a key ingredient in this equation. Facilities aren't necessarily new or fancy, but they consistently encourage adequate resting time and help minimize lameness issues. Most often, these herds are housed in well-maintained, sand-bedded freestalls. That's not to say that good cow comfort can't be facilitated by other bedding types, but sand is the bedding substrate that makes it the easiest to achieve.

3 *There is a strong focus on forage quality.* With forages typically providing around half of a lactation ration's dry matter and two-thirds to three-quarters of its fiber content, a

herd's production can flourish or flounder based on forage quality. Sure, other ration considerations are important, but without good forage fermentability, milk output will never be what it otherwise could. These herds also go to great lengths to ensure silages are densely packed and undergo good fermentations.

Well-made, properly kernel-processed BMR corn silage is a forage that shows up regularly in the rations of these elite-producing herds. But any forage that has excellent fiber digestibility and encourages higher dry matter intake can be a good fit.

A herd fed by a nutritionist colleague recently achieved the 100-pound tank average – on a ration that contained 62 percent forage. Another

herd fed by this same nutritionist was averaging 88 pounds of milk with a 4 percent fat test on a 70 percent forage ration while only milking 2X. Neither of these herds uses rBST, although it too is an excellent management tool used by some dairies to improve milk production and profitability. One herd was feeding BMR corn silage; the other was feeding grass silage with extremely high fiber digestibility (an RFQ of just under 200 and a 30-hour neutral detergent fiber digestibility of 72 percent). Without a doubt, exceptional forage quality was one key to these herds' outstanding production levels.

4 *They maintain positive*

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momentum and consistency. One-hundred-pound herd managers are adept at avoiding or at least minimizing changes and occurrences on the dairy that can negatively impact the cows or their daily routine. Milking times are consistent from day to day, essential equipment breakdowns rarely occur, effective heat abatement measures are appropriately employed, cows don't run out of feed, and forage and feed ingredient inventories are well-monitored and well-maintained so that abrupt ration changes can be avoided.

Feeders are particular about their feeding management. A consistently formulated TMR is delivered load after load, day after day. The cows rarely have to recover and rebound from some negative insult that has lowered their dry matter intake and milk production. Without these setbacks, cows maintain

positive momentum, making it easier for them to "win the race," rather than just finish it.

5 They establish and maintain operational procedures that are simple, effective, efficient and cow-friendly, and they also value and empower their employees. This win-win approach works well not only for the cows but also for the producer and the dairy labor force. Cow time budgets are more likely to be appropriately maintained. Labor efficiency, consistency and competence are improved. These considerations allow the cows to spend more time doing what they're supposed to do and herd management to be proactive rather than reactive.

6 They recognize that little things can collectively contribute to big things.

A consistent observation on these high-producing herds is: There is never a big gap in their herd management, health or nutrition programs. Furthermore, the higher the tank average, usually the more difficult it becomes to identify even minor bottlenecks or opportunities for improvement.

Stated another way, it becomes increasingly difficult to find anything that's being done wrong. These herd owners and managers recognize that small oversights or missed opportunities can add up. A single minor issue may not cause a problem, but taken collectively, adding three of these together may generate a sum value of four or five from the cows' perspective. There is value in attention to detail, and many elite herd managers will tell you it can be measured in the bulk tank.

7 Cow body size is usually above-average. We need to remember there is a physical component to the high-production equation. It takes extremely high levels of dry matter intake to support such lofty levels of milk production. Herds averaging 100 pounds of milk in the tank are likely to have a few cows peaking at or more than 200 pounds of milk. These cows are probably consuming 80 pounds of dry matter or more per day. Large bodies, the large rumens that come with them and the proportionately lower maintenance costs of bigger cows offer several undeniable advantages when elite production is the goal.

It turns out there really are no secrets or magic ingredients involved. As with herds that perennially excel at profitability, all the fundamental bases are thoroughly covered. These herds consistently do an above-average to excellent job with all the management considerations that keep cows happy and healthy. They



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attain and sustain their impressive levels of milk production by doing what's right for their cows, day after week after month. Production-related bottlenecks are regularly searched for, and when identified, they are minimized or eliminated. Cow comfort, cow health, management consistency and fermentable forages that facilitate high levels of dry matter intake are unwavering constants for these herds. Perhaps your goal isn't to average 100 pounds in the tank, as high production alone does not guarantee success in the dairy industry. Even if that is the case, there are still valuable lessons to be learned from (or reinforced by) these herds that should provide you with some ideas to improve performance and profitability. No magic wand required. **PD**

R. Tom Bass is a veterinarian with 15 years of experience in dairy nutrition.

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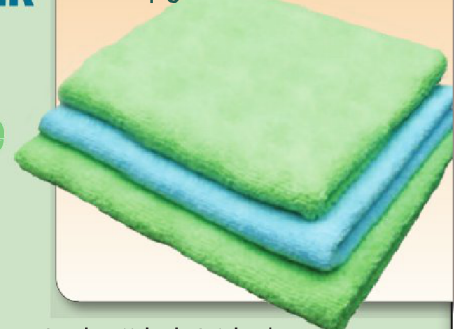
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