

BROWN SWISS BETTER THAN HOLSTEINS?

My recent articles regarding the use of grazed grass for high yielding cows only being fit to lie on (March 2005 issue of British Dairying) sparked plenty of phone calls and discussion. Some of these disagreements – sorry – discussions were printed in the April 2005 issue.

There was also a strong letter sent to and published by British Dairying from Mike Edwards of Grove Farm in Wiltshire. Mike took great exception to my comments as he said his Brown Swiss were capable of consuming and coping with large amounts of forage and it was unfair to class his cows with Holsteins.

I was intrigued. So I arranged a visit to Grove Farm to see for myself.

Mike and Jayne Edwards, Cimarron Partnership, have farmed for 8 years at Grove Farm. There are 195 acres of very heavy ground – ideal for grass growing. The 84 Brown Swiss calve all year round and have a yield average of 9350 litres.



Spring and summer feeding is strip-grazing paddocks with plentiful grazing in front of the cows and concentrates in the parlour. A buffer feed of grass silage or hay is available from September, but no concentrates are fed outside. Winter-feeding consists of maize silage, grass silage, hay, brewers' grains or wheat and a protein blend. Cake is fed in the parlour to yield. There are no magic ingredients here!

I have tabled the herd performance below: Herd yield (litres) - 9350

Feed rate (kg/litre) - 0.22

Milk from forage (litres) - 4502

Butterfat (%) - 4.15

Protein (%) - 3.37

SCC - 86

Bactoscan - 38

Replacement rate (%) - 15

Calving to conception (days) - 132

So now I'm faced with these figures and looking for holes. I'm not finding it easy! I clutch at straws and go for the calving to conception days. I am being very picky as the national average is the same but at a much lower yield. Nevertheless, this is costing £190 per cow. Mike explained his views on this point "I only serve cows when they are bulling and do not use any artificial veterinary aids. If a cow is to be served at night because that is the best time, then she is served at night." Looking at the low replacement rate I have to concede.

Low replacement rates means there should be older cows in the herd. Sure enough there are plenty of 7 and 8 year olds. As everything is served to a Brown Swiss I asked Mike what he did with his surplus heifers. These are sold and are currently achieving an average of £1700! Having a positive replacement figure each year, rather than a negative one is a huge benefit. Very few costing systems illustrate the massive cost of a high replacement rate as they are geared to margin per litre if it is milk from forage driven, or milk yield if it is concentrate driven.

At this low a feed rate forage quality must be paramount. Mike said "Grass silage is cut at the end of May with attention given to achieving highly palatable forage. I record daily dry matter intakes when cows are inside. The average is 23-24 kilos of dry matter per day. Although no concentrates are fed outside in the spring/summer period, cows up to service receive 2-3kgs of wheat individually as an extra feed. Cows rarely peak above 45 litres and hold their lactation line."

We looked at the cows whilst they were grazing. The thing that caught my eye was that they were greedy – if they were not lying down they were grazing voraciously. This is ideal as a greedy cow is usually a healthy, high producing cow.

Considering the level of milk yield the cows were in good condition and had a good rumen fill. This is not a young herd, although the cows did not look old. Some of the cows were into their teens and still going strong.

What are Mike and Jayne's objectives for the future? "Our performance has improved in the last few years since we started using the products and services of Rod Smith from Severn Vale Feeds. They are very particular about raw material selection in their compounds. As we only feed a low level of concentrates, then quality is important. It was Rod's suggestion we feed wheat to the highest yielding cows and we have seen the benefit. We need to see where we level out and then think about where to go next," replied Jayne.

So who is correct? Is grazed grass any use for high yielding cows?

Mike commented, "I do agree that excessive protein in spring grass can cause a loss of condition and subsequent fertility problems – but mainly Holsteins, not Brown Swiss".

My views are thus: You cannot fail to be impressed with what Mike and Jayne are doing at Grove Farm. Maybe it is a case of "Horses for Courses" or perhaps more appropriately "Feeds for Breeds". The figures speak for themselves.

I would still like to blood test a few early lactation cows at grass just to see what the cows think and to confirm things one way or the other. What I do know now is that the Brown Swiss copes with forage better than many breeds. I would also like to bet that Mike and Jayne would make a success of whatever breed they worked with. Management is the major factor and this farm has it in spades.

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