

**Geoff Spence**

A keen eye for detail and embracing new technology are just two of many factors that saw his herd win the industry's most coveted award.



Herd size:	370 cows
Annual production:	3.64m litres
Calving interval:	385 days
Somatic cell count:	135,000 cells/ml

A first-time entrant, North Yorkshire-based producer Geoff Spence has scooped the title in this year's NMR/RABDF Gold Cup competition. Based at Lowfields Farm just north of Northallerton in North Yorkshire, his

Strive for perfection sees herd strike gold

Debutant scoops dairy crown

Team work, technology and attention to detail. Just some of the facets that have seen one North Yorkshire dairy business grow – in both size and stature – to become this year's winner of the NMR/RABDF Gold Cup. We paid the Spence family's 'dream team' a visit to find out more.

text **Karen Wright**

370-cow Miresdale pedigree Holstein herd wowed the panel of judges when they visit the unit to see first-hand how Geoff and his team run the business and how they have built up what they hope is a sustainable future in the industry.

Milk produced at the 84-hectare unit is taken by Arla to Leeds on an ASDA contract. For the year ending March 2009, 3,640,000 litres of milk were sold off the farm. Milk production for the Gold Cup qualifying year was 10,400kg



Aggressive eaters: it's important that there's plenty of room at the feed barrier



Geoff Spence (second from left) and his father Tom are presented with the NMR/RABDF Gold Cup by (from left to right) RABDF president Lady Byford, NMR chairman Philip Kirkham and RABDF chairman Lyndon Edwards

at 3.9% fat and 3.1% protein with a 385-day calving interval.

Geoff's aim for perfection in all aspects of management, as well as his belief in being very hands on, are both part of his recipe for success. He also makes use of an experienced and able support team both on and off the farm. Geoff and herdsman, Mark Fawcett, do most of the morning milkings together so know, first hand, if the cows are looking up to scratch. But Geoff also expects staff Ian Shuttleworth and his own son Chris to perform to the same high standards and flag up any problems.

Dream team

And the team extends far beyond the farm. Geoff relies heavily on his vet Mark Glover, nutritionist Steve Allen, secretary Vicky Anderson, farm consultant Paul Dennison, and genetic analyst Drew Wilson. Geoff is in regular contact with them through on-site meetings, phone calls and emails. New technology – if it looks to benefit the business – is something Geoff isn't afraid of. He was one of the first users of InterHerd and rates this as one of his best business decisions in recent years. "Pre BSE we used calendars and paper milk records but it took too long to wade through it all. The vet recommended Daisy and that evolved into InterHerd – a recording system that outpaces any other for health and fertility. We send the vet all the cow and heifer health and fertility events and he gets the milk records directly so we can both see what's happening."

Cow health and welfare have always

been a high priority for Geoff and this was foremost in his mind when the decision was taken to put up new cow housing 10 years ago. "People put in fancy parlours but the cows still have to return to the same grotty housing for the majority of the day and the same problems return. I wanted to get cow comfort right and make sure that the cows had plenty of room to move around and to rest."

The result was new accommodation with wider passageways, sand beds and more loafing room. Forced ventilation and an insulated roof were also part of the design and cow brushes were added.

"Switching to sand bedding has made a big impact. We saw cases of mastitis drop from 46 cases per 100 cows to just 7.7 cases and we maintain an average cell count of around 135,000 cells/ml with a Bactoscan of 29."

New concepts

A new 16:16 herringbone parlour was installed in 2003 that cut milking time by two thirds. And Geoff has also taken on a number of new concepts in nutrition.

These include monthly body condition score measurements, to monitor the trends within different stages of lactation.

Another new concept is the addition of LiFT – a liver function enhancer – to the dry cow ration at a rate of 50g/cow/day alongside wholecrop, grass silage, straw, protein straights, vitamins and minerals. "We dry off 42 to 45 days pre calving and look to give the cows a seamless transition as she starts her next lactation,

making sure the rumen is working to full capacity.

"It's important that the cows go into lactation on top form and they need to be aggressive eaters. We look for 27kg dry matter intake in the high group and make sure feed chop length is optimised in the silages and there's plenty of room at the feed barrier."

Six-month 'sabbatical'

If Geoff suspects a cow is below par and her records show she is struggling then she gets a 'sabbatical'. "It might be she needs a six-month break to recharge," he says. "Some farmers would send them down the road but my cows have 10 lives – they have some well earned rest then come back into the herd when they're ready."

This has paid dividends in the past. Geoff is proud of his 13% cull rate and doesn't intend to put this in jeopardy.

Breeding is also key to the success of the herd and Geoff acknowledges the tremendous influence his father brings to this area of the operation. The family have been selling top quality breeding stock for more than 40 years.

Commitment to home-bred genetics has continued. Today a third of the cows in the milking herd are sired by their own bulls and high fertility bulls are used on the rest of the herd, with particular attention paid to productive life.

The oldest cow in the herd has had 12 calves in 13 years nine months and averaged 10,853kg with a CI of 366 days.

Medium-sized cows with staying power are the main criteria. Care is always taken to ensure good feet and legs for this year-round housed herd. "Good feet and legs are a combination of breeding and management," he adds.

Although the herd has been built up over many years, Geoff has moved into overdrive in the past decade with a doubling in herd size and in turnover too. His dedication to developing a successful dairy business has been recognised by the many visitors the unit has had both from the UK and abroad. Looking ahead, Geoff doesn't rule out an increase in herd size but appreciates more investment will be needed in dry cow and heifer facilities.

"You have to keep looking outside the box and particularly at cow welfare, which will remain our number one priority on the farm. The success of this business relies on the production of high quality milk and cattle – and for this to happen we need happy healthy cows." |