

# National Heifer Rearer of the Year Award 2013

The competition is sponsored by Volac and supported by XL Vets and British Dairying.

Giving youngsters the best possible start will pay dividends later for the herd's future potential. That's a fact which has just been qualified by a Royal Veterinary College study which concluded that heifers reaching target bulging weight at 13 months and calving around 24 months achieved the highest level of performance in terms of yield, fertility and survival during their first five years—see pages 30 and 31 for a full report.

Good management practice in calf rearing has never been more important, with the cost of rearing replacements to the point of calving currently estimated at more than £1,200 and an average of 15% of heifers failing to reach first calving.

To raise that awareness, Volac has staged its third National Heifer Rearer of the Year award, supported by XL Vets and British Dairying. Open to all farmers rearing heifer replacements throughout Britain, the award received overwhelming interest and support. The initial entries were screened and the shortlist was judged by one of Volac's regional business managers.

Four regional finalists located from Cumbria to Devon were selected for final judging by Volac's ruminant nutritionist, Ian Watson, a vet from one of XL Vets member practices and British Dairying editor, Mike Green.

Ian comments: "The common goal for all four finalists was the



Liney Aude with judges Ian Watson, Joanna Reed and Mike Green.

desire to introduce well grown heifers into the herd by focusing on the calf in the infancy stages. All finalists were fully aware of the importance of getting it right in this rearing phase and have moved nearer to reaching their respective goals in recent times by embracing the information available.

"Knowledge transfer took the form of seeking advice from experts in the field, monitoring growth rates against published data and where this didn't exist actively trying to build a profile within their herd society, or broadening horizons by travelling to research how heifers are reared in other countries. "Although all farms were different in their rearing practices they were all highly successful and it was great

• Volac will be presenting the overall winners with a computerized calf feeding system at the Livestock Event at the NEC, Birmingham on Thursday July 4th. You are invited to come along to the Volvo stand (E7-476) at 11.30am to hear the announcement, meet the overall winner and the three finalists and find out more about what it takes to be the National Heifer Rearer of the Year.

to see the detail going into heifer rearing and some of the novel approaches used."

Ian adds: "All four regional finalists should be congratulated for reaching this point in the award. One thing that was apparent on each visit was the drive, commitment and enthusiasm for their business and the industry as a whole. Judging this award was a great pleasure and choosing an overall winner was an extremely difficult task."



The winner of the competition will win a computerized calf feeding system.

Janet Ashton, Awasland Farm, Torrington, Devon

Janet Ashton has witnessed a sea change in heifer performance since she and her husband, Phil, joined the family farm five years ago and helped manage its 180-cow pedigree Jersey herd.

"Since adopting a very strict management plan including a comprehensive vaccination programme, improved nutrition in the first 12 weeks and concerted efforts to understand Jersey requirements, heifer mortality has fallen from 40% to a current 10%," she explains.

"All seasons are now very rare and we're on track for heifers to weigh 400kg at calving at 24 months and yield 5,600 litres in their first lactation," she explains.

"Much more attention to detail begins at birth when every calf is novel dressed and bottle fed two

litres of colostrum within its first hour, and offered a further two litres within the next five hours. Colostrum, tested with a colostrimeter, is fed for the next five days at which point the calves are transferred from individual pens in traditional housing to outdoor hutches and introduced to milk replacer.

"Little research has been carried out on Jerseys and their requirements to exploit their potential. However, we've found that the calves have higher energy requirements over Holsteins. We feed up to two litres of milk replacer twice a day mixed at either 165 grams or 180 grams per litre depending on outside temperature and aim to develop the rumen early on. "We offer fresh water and

straw from birth and concentrate soon after. By weaning at 18 weeks they must be eating 25kg per day of concentrate. We've introduced 18.5% CP starter pellets, to prevent sorting and which have a hard coating which stimulates saliva production and rumen function.

"I set target growth rates and measure throughout the rearing period—I take very little time and certainly help us to manage better and pull out any calves for individual attention if necessary. A weighband is used to check the target 70kg weaning weight, after which I run them in front of a weight band at 12 week intervals in the run up to first service at 15 months."

Volac comment: "Andrew Stokes, Product Farm Vets: "Janet told me that she's been treating sick animals and so a strict programme of disease prevention is in place at Awasland Farm. Vaccination is used to prevent worm and pneumonia and testing is in place for BVD and Johne's, but this would cost for nothing without Janet's time and dedication to provide the correct calf nutrition, housing and husbandry. To have lost no calves from birth to 12 weeks over the last year is testimony to the fact that she's doing a fantastic job."



Janet Ashton has reared the award of Jersey calves.

## What the judges liked:

- Active looking for growth rate benchmarks for Jersey breed.
- Invention better than cow attitude to potential disease challenges.
- Regular growth rate monitoring and responding accordingly.
- Improvements made to calf rearing enterprise in last five years.

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## Lydney Awde, Broadmeadows, Penrith, Cumbria

Top health, nutrition and housing are Lyney Awde's three priorities for heifer rearing to achieve a more profitable and sustainable pedigree Holstein Friesian herd which has built up over the last decade.

"The calves are our herd's future. We're aware that paying full attention to detail in those first few weeks helps to increase growth rates, reduce future health issues and thereby gives a long way to maximising their full potential and increase yields in first lactation heifers," explains Lyney who farms in partnership with her parents Trevor and Frances and brother Francis. The milking herd numbers 400 head currently averaging 9,966 litres.

## What the judges liked:

- Exceptional attention to detail of calves during the first 15 days.
- Use of laminated sheets in individual pens to aid communication.
- Ability to adapt feeding and management protocol in relation to current circumstances.
- Enthusiasm and willingness to listen to and adapt new ideas using a collaborative approach with vet and nutritionist.

## Cope family and Andrew Brisbourne, Shropshire

The Cope family has adopted a strategy which is ensuring that their heifer replacements are an target to calve at two years and achieve optimum lifetime performance within their 790-cow herd. "We believe that routinely measuring and monitoring the heifers throughout the rearing period is vital, and they are currently on track coming in to the herd and calving at an average 23 months and 5,946g," Carolyn Cope explains.

A detailed management, staff training and health protocol has been developed in partnership with her vet's benchmark initiative to ensure the calves get off to the best start. Calves are weighed at birth and fed four litres of pasteurised colostrum within four hours. A second colostrum feed

## What the judges liked:

- Joint approach with vet to ensure that calves are given the best start while on the 'home farm'.
- Team approach and trust exhibited between the Copes and Andrew Brisbourne in relation to ability to hit growth targets.
- Regular and precise monitoring of growth parameters and ability to react quickly to changes in growth rates.
- Andrew Brisbourne's drive to increase knowledge by helping form a discussion group for specialist 'third party' heifer rearers.

three litres by tube followed by a further three litres within the first six hours, after which they are introduced to milk replacer. The calves remain in an individual pen for at least 10 days before being transferred to a group of up to 20 and a computerised calf feeding system which provides up to six litres of milk per day mixed at a consistent 145 grams of powder per litre.

"We also attempt to provide a consistent environment for the calves. However, living in the helen of the Pennines, the temperature can fluctuate from -5C to +5C within minutes. Every calf being during the autumn and winter is fitted with a jacket and heat lamps are provided when the temperature falls below 3C. We

also increase milk powder intakes during this period."

**Vet comment - James Reed, Pennine Veterinary Group:**

"At Broadmeadows there is a clear and determined focus to produce high quality heifer replacements. To Lyney's credit she is acutely aware of how important the management of heifers affects profitability within the dairy herd. There is great attention to detail within the calf rearing in terms of reducing the incidence of scours, bloat and the use of vaccines to reduce disease incidence. What is also impressive is the ongoing commitment to evolve the heifer rearing system to meet the most recent thinking."

## ment fits like a

glove. "I'm interested in managing heifers from only one herd for bio-security purposes. On entry, the heifers are vaccinated for coxiellosis, BVD and Lepto. Height measurements are taken and again at weaning and on leaving. I also weigh every heifer on arrival and thereafter on a four to eight week interval to which gives regular information on how the heifers are performing and if necessary, we will alter the diet if growth rates are falling below the target of 0.8kg DMIW—" it takes less than 20 minutes to put through a bath of 24 head. Our ultimate goal is for the heifers

to be offered and then milk replacer introduced, with the aim of weaning at 56 days of age. After weaning, the calves leave the Cope's Basildon Farm, Ashford, Market Drayton for Andrew Brisbourne's specialist heifer rearing unit, 20 minutes drive away at Hadnall, Shrewsbury.

"We decided that engaging with a professional rearing unit would take the stress out of the job and enable us to concentrate on the cows," she says. "The partnership works well, trust is high on the agenda and Andrew works to the high standard we aspire to. We have the assurance that he monitors and monitors which provides a continual benchmark and we communicate with each other at least once a week."



Lyney Awde.

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Andrew Brisbourne and Carolyn Cope.

to leave here six to eight weeks before calving at a targeted 22 to 24 months and between 5,946g to 6,000g. Having detailed growth rate figures allows me to benchmark within the group, between current groups and from year to year."

**Vet comment - James Marden, Shropshire Farm Vets:**

"It is encouraging to see a strong ethos for investment by a dynamic team with a proven delivery approach to calf health at Basildon Farm. Adequately colostrum tubes, calf tagging and identification, routine daily feeding, vaccination and deworming are all carried out according to clearly laid out timeframes and methods. These strict protocols, which are on clear display in the calf shed allow all members of staff to know exactly what should be done, when to do it and how it should be done."

## Kirk family, Holt Farm, Lutterworth, Warwickshire

The Kirk family firmly believes that a dairy animal's lifetime performance is hugely influenced in the first weeks of life.

That factor has led them to utilise a neighbouring farm to introduce a specialist rearing unit away from the milking herd 18 months ago and pay greater attention to detail to new born calves. And the result—mortality has fallen from 7% to 2% in the first 10 weeks at Holt Farm, home to a 400-cow herd of pedigree red and white Holsteins.

"Our cows come on to straw and as soon as a calf is born we're on to it," says Steve who farms with his wife Anne, son Rob and daughter Katie. "Every calf is stretched at birth, its navel

## What the judges liked:

- The business has a clear plan for the long term future featuring the whole family.
- Key emphasis on milk calves which includes attention to detail, colostrum management and a high plan of nutrition.
- Overall quality of stock on site exceptional.
- Regular review of on farm rearing practices and willingness to change to ensure quality of heifers calving into the herd is maximised.

disinfected and transported to individual straw binned pens.

We attempt to minimise stress by providing a warm and dry environment—each pen is fitted with an infrared lamp and we are considering buying jackets to use on frail calves.

"As part of our commitment to Tinsie we routinely test for John's, and if there is any irregular results for a particular animal we feed its offspring frozen colostrum to avoid any potential risks. All calves are fed up to five litres as soon as we can, if it will take more, then we feed a mose. Therefore we feed up to seven litres per day of colostrum for the first three to four days."

At four days of age the calves



Rob, Steve, Anne and Katie Kirk.

are introduced to an automated feeding system and offered six litres of milk replacer reconstituted at 15% solids with free access water hay and ad lib concentrate. Weaning takes place at 70 days when solid feed intakes

are over 2kg per head and calves have reached 2.5 times their birth weight. Heifers remain on a concentrate and hay diet until FVD in calf, after which depending on the time of year they may be turned out to grass.

**Vet comment - Steve Smith, Pennine Veterinary Health Centre:**

"Steve has a very clear plan of what he wants to achieve in terms of rearing heifers. He has involved the whole family in implementing the plan and it is their total commitment that is driving their success. They clearly value their heifers as the future of their herd. Their commitment and attention to detail brings high quality results time and time again."

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