

UK herds battle it out for dairy industry's most prestigious title

Top six set sights on Gold Cup

This year's NMR/RABDF Gold Cup will go to one of six dairy herds who have reached the final stages, from a line-up of 957 possible entries. It's a UK battle with two herds from Lancashire, two from Somerset, a Scottish herd and a Northern Irish herd.

text **Karen Wright**

NM/RABDF Gold Cup judges – NMR chairman Philip Kirkham, Lyndon Edwards from RABDF and Dorset-based 2011 Gold Cup winner Tom King – will review each finalist, looking at the whole dairy business, how they manage their resources and their commitment to the industry. The winner will be announced

and the Gold Cup will be presented on the NMR stand at the Livestock Event, at the NEC in Birmingham, on July 2.

➔ *Want to know a bit more about each finalist? Read a full report on NMR's website www.nmr.co.uk and see who you think should win this year's NMR/RABDF Gold Cup.*



Mark Verity, Clitheroe, Lancs

A Lancashire-based 350-cow herd, Mark Verity's mainly Friesian cows with some Jersey and Swedish Red crosses, are kept on the 283ha farm within the Forest of Bowland. Mark manages the day-to-day running of

the herd with the help of computer systems Crystal and InterHerd that, by being kept up to date, act as 'guiding lights' on herd performance and health. He also relies on his family and four staff plus his nutritionist Duncan Rose, vet

Robert Howe, Simon Redcliffe for breeding and grassland adviser James Bretherton, who has helped him pursue an extensive grazing system in an area with 1,750mm of rain a year. "We've installed 3.5 miles of astro turf and conveyor belt rubber tracks to allow us to graze without excessive poaching," says Mark.

"We've also developed an autumn block calving herd so we can get full benefit of the grass over summer and it also means that we can concentrate on cow nutrition and routine vet visits at specific times of the year. This has contributed to yields and to our good fertility rates."

Production for the qualifying period was 8,244kg of milk at 4.65% fat and 3.23% protein with a somatic cell count of 126,000cells/ml. The herd's calving index is 380 days with heifers calving at 24.5 months and the herd has a replacement rate of 22%. Milk is sold to Arla Foods Amba. A new building erected 18 months ago has allowed the family to expand herd numbers from 280 to 350 using only their own replacements. With spare capacity, growth will continue to a target of 400 cows plus followers.

Mark Verity



David and James Tomlinson, Preston, Lancashire

Another family team, David, Sheila and James Tomlinson have made it to the Gold Cup final for the second year running. In 2013 they were runners-up and recipients of the NMR Silver Salver.

David and James Tomlinson



This high performance herd has achieved an average yield of 10,942kg of milk at 4.34% fat and 3.10% protein on twice-a-day milking for the year ending September 2013.

The herd has progressed well during

the past 12 months, according to James. "We've installed 50 more cow cubicles, extended a roofed silage clamp, grown the storage business and increased average 305 day yield by 404kg across the herd."

Land work and feeding are David's responsibility, but he also has a big say in breeding. "We want a balanced cow," says David. "Type merit should be between 1 and 2 with good production and avoiding extremes. Legs and feet are important with longevity and production our main aims so they are as trouble free as possible."

All cows are bred to Holstein bulls and any surplus stock is sold. Bilsrow animals are well known through winning prizes in the show ring and attracting good prices at sales.

Milk is sold to Pakkezza Dairies in Rochdale.

With cow numbers now at 250 and 220 youngstock, and more land recently acquired, the Tomlinsons are set for expansion.

Neil Baker, Haselbury Plucknett, Somerset

Also in the final for the second time is Neil Baker, who has managed to both grow his herd and significantly boost yields during the past year. The family-owned unit now extends

Neil Baker



to 663ha, with the herd size rising by 200 during the past year to 1,200 cows. Neil has also boosted yields by 560kg in the past 12 months, while also seeking to reduce production costs and improve

herd health. For the qualifying year, this herd averaged 10,940kg at 3.71% fat and 3.23% protein with a somatic cell count of 105,000cells/ml. The herd's average lifetime daily yield was 12.82kg.

A brand new forager made its debut with the first-cut silage this year and, so far, Neil is pleased with his investment. "It's much bigger so can cover more acres, which means silage-making is timely."

More milk from forage and reducing purchased feed costs by buying better and investing in new storage for straights are both targets. "I want to use straights and co-products in this year's rations," he says. "If it works, the ration will be considerably better value."

Further herd expansion lies ahead, using a mix of home-bred replacements and freshly calved heifers from Germany this autumn. Increasing production is also on the cards with a target of 12,000 litres per cow sold.

Michael Eavis, Glastonbury, Somerset

Running a dairy farm on the Glastonbury Festival site certainly comes with its challenges, but during the past few years herd manager John Taylor, along with owner Michael Eavis, has made considerable changes, with dramatic results.



"We used to operate as a flying herd, but it just created too many problems with disease and cows not settling in," says John. "So about eight years ago we started keeping our own replacements using a contract rearer, and now we've brought it all in-hand."

Average production for the year ending September 2013 was 12,101kg of milk at 3.96% fat and 3.11% protein on twice-a-day milking. The herd's average lifetime daily yield was 15.39kg.

"We try to keep our system simple with as few diet changes as possible," says

John Taylor and Michael Eavis

John. "But the biggest change has been growing more maize. We used to feed apple pomace as it was free from cider makers – but it's very acidic. We had to balance it with bicarbonate, and since we swapped it for maize it's transformed the health of the cows."

Energy efficiency is also important, with a large roof-mounted solar array reducing electricity costs, and spring water slashing water bills.

In the next few years they aim to push cow numbers from 385 to 500. Milking frequency may be increased too by using robots to improve the quality of life for both staff and cows.

John Harvey and family, Beeswing, Dumfries

No newcomers to the prize-winning ring, brothers John and Stuart Harvey and their mother Margaret were 2012 AgriScot Scottish Dairy Farm of the Year winners and in the top 1% of NMR recorded herds.



This Holstein herd of 249 cows yielded 11,779kg of milk at 4.25% of fat and 3.21% protein on three-times-a-day milking for the year ending September 2013. They achieved a low average cell count of 102,000cells/ml – helped, they believe, by bedding cows on sand. This all-year-round calving herd has a calving interval of 401 days.

In a decade of developments, the Harveys have increased cows from 80 to 330 and doubled yields. "We've also invested in the farm's infrastructure during the past four years, adding new silage pits, a

John and Stuart Harvey

one-million-gallon slurry store and a new cubicle shed for 140 cows, with SDP funding," says Stuart.

Cows are kept in two groups and great care is taken of dry cows. "We monitor blood ketone levels and urine pHs of dry cows fortnightly and keep them on sand-bedded cubicles up until calving. We then move them to a sand-bedded yard. This seems to be reducing mastitis infection in the dry period," adds John. With cow numbers at their target level, the Harveys will look to develop the market for surplus Killywhan heifers while maintaining high levels of management.

Darren and Stuart McMurrin, Banbridge, Co Down

Across the Irish channel, brothers Darren and Stuart McMurrin are Gold Cup finalists for a second time. Their 300-cow Holstein herd has yielded



10,829kg of milk in the year ending September 2013 – nearly 300kg up on the previous year – with fat at 3.84% and protein at 3.06% on three-times-a-day milking. They are targeting 12,000kg of milk by September 2014.

"But we won't do this at the expense of controlling feed costs and maintaining cow health," stresses Darren.

Darren and Stuart believe in taking a consistent approach to everything on their 202-hectare unit. Four crops of silage are taken each year by an 'in-house' team. "We do this to make sure

Darren and Stuart McMurrin

we cut grass at exactly the right time," adds Stuart.

With the herd's average lifetime daily yield running at a high level of 14.82kg it is clear that cow health and fertility must be in good shape. The calving interval to September 2013 was 396 days and they calve heifers at 25.5 months. Milk is now sold to Fane Valley Dairies, to support their local co-op and to take advantage of the better payment and bonus structure.

Better feed efficiency, more milk from forage and increasing the return per cubicle space are the aims on this unit.