

Choosing Bulls on the Fast Track

Young Holstein breeder says good bulls and genomics improve herd quickly

Matt Ruby is just 19 years old but well on his way as a progressive Holstein producer with an eye for breeding good commercial cows.

Matt, a sophomore studying dairy science at California Polytechnic State University, is not quite ready to start farming full-time. But he's close. He spends his summers working on the farm, Fir Ridge Holsteins LLC, in Scio, Oregon, doing whatever needs to be done. While back at school, his job may be even more important—choosing the matings for all the cows and heifers.

Fir Ridge Holsteins is a partnership of Matt's father, Scott Ruby, his aunt, Michele Ruby, and his grandmother, Ida Ruby. Ida is the widow of former Holstein USA director Ray Ruby; she is, Michele says, not only its business manager but "the heart and soul of the dairy." Michele manages employee relations, takes care of all records, and helps problem solve when she's needed.



Scott, who is also vice president of sales and marketing for World Wide Sires, helps by contracting all of the dairy's feed, as well as bull selection. He and Matt communicate often about which bulls to use, and flush and IVF cow matings.

Fir Ridge has a rolling herd average of 24,122 pounds of milk, 3X, with 3.85% fat (928 pounds) and 3.10% protein (748

pounds). The herd is 100 percent Registered Holsteins®, is on Holstein COMPLETE, and classifies every seven months. In the past five-and-a-half years, they have had 664 Very Good and 39 Excellent animals.

The cows are housed and milked in two locations: Scio (where the youngstock are also raised) and 83 miles away in Cloverdale,

Oregon. Each location has between 550 and 600 cows and a double-14 herringbone parlor. The cows are fed essentially the same ration, in three groups: high-production, low-production, and two-year-olds and fresh cows. Milk from one herd is shipped to Tillamook Cheese and the other to Safeway's Portland, Oregon, processing plant.

The farm raises about a third of its forage, including grass and clover hay, and purchases all commodities, including byproducts from local canneries. All the animals are pastured—although

by August this year, the pastures had run out of grass because of the stubborn drought.

Breeding Strategy

In his breeding program, Matt aims for a balanced cow with good milk production that breeds back easily; type and udder are also important when selecting bulls. "We don't look at pounds of milk but pounds of fat and protein when breeding," he said. "And we don't look at Productive Life as much as we used to, because if cows breed back and have good milk production, they're going to last long anyway, so Productive Life isn't as important."

He and his dad pick 10 high-ranking genomic bulls from each proof, using a formula to create their own index: 20% PTA Protein, 15% PTA Fat (35% Production Traits), 20% Fertility Index, 5% Somatic Cell Count, 5% Daughter Stillbirth (30% Health Traits), 15% PTA Type, 15% Udder Composite, and 5% Strength (35% Type Traits). They use those bulls for at least four months, until the next proof.

"Since we cycle bulls in and out of the program so often, due to lower reliability on genomic bulls with less data and no daughters, we mostly use our new, higher-ranking proof bulls on high-index cows and heifers, with sexed semen on first service on all heifers," Matt said. On other cows, they use up the semen from previous proof runs. "Semen value decreases so quickly



Matt Ruby and Andrew King, Holstein Association USA regional sales representative, discuss Enlight.



Matt Ruby with one of his favorites, Miss TMK Jackman Milly-ET.

in the genomic age that the quicker you get rid of the semen you paid top dollar for, the more value you can potentially bring to the next generation at a quicker rate.”

The dairy does little conventional flushing but they do IVF high-ranking heifers, using Enlight™ to choose the recipients from the bottom 20 percent of their herd. “We look at the daughter pregnancy rate (DPR), always the parentage, and then classification scores to make sure the dam is not a high scorer. And we usually use virgin heifers. We used to use cows as recipis but the conception rate was not as good.”

Matt’s a fan of Enlight. “Whether it is for finding ET recipients, heifers to genomic test, or viewing the progress of the herd as a whole, it captures a herd the size of ours either at a population point of view or individually extremely well and makes it easy to manage all of our Holsteins. The program saves me a lot of pedigree evaluation and headaches.”

A Better Herd Through Genomics

The dairy genomic-tests animals above 2050 TPI, which is 15 percent of the herd. It uses genomics to improve the herd, not just for potential future bull contracts. Genomic tests can verify missed identifications and help with their heifer flushing program. “It also aids us in understanding where our herd is compared to the rest of the U.S. Holstein breed,” Matt said.

Fir Ridge lags a bit behind top genetic herds because the dairy didn’t begin genomic testing or using high TPI bulls until about three years after genomics became available. “That’s why we do not always get bulls like Jedi in our herd until he is released to everyone with sexed semen—because our numbers are good but not elite,” Matt said.

“However, our philosophy is that, with the number of replacements that roll through our herd and by only using good bulls, with continued genomic testing on the top 15 percent of our herd we could potentially get consecutive 200-TPI point jumps over parent average with the testing over several generations.” 🐄