

Metzger Named Progressive Dairy Producer

National Dairy Shrine has named Dana Metzger, Rock Rapids, Iowa, as winner of the Progressive Dairy Producer award in the large herd division. He will be honored during the organization's annual banquet on September 11, 2013, at the Pennsylvania All-American Dairy Show in Harrisburg, Pa.

Metzger and his family operate Multi-Rose Jerseys, a Registered Jersey herd of 1,500 cows and 1,100 replacement heifers. The herd is enrolled on REAP and uses JerseyTags for permanent identification. Multi-Rose Jerseys has a rolling herd average of 17,666 lbs. milk, 876 lbs. fat and 668 lbs. protein for August 2013. It ranks among the top 25% in the nation for Jersey Performance Index (JPI) with a herd average JPI of +47 following the August 2013 genetic evaluations. The Metzgers also farm 1,900 acres of cropland, operate a 7,000-hog wean-to-finish enterprise and feed out their Jersey steers.

Metzger grew up on the family farm and officially joined the business in 1999, after he graduated from college and had been working off the farm nearly two years. He and his brother, Reed, were given the chance to buy out an uncle and become owners of Multi-Rose Jerseys with their father, Marvin, and another uncle, Bill. At that point, Dana assumed responsibility for the daily management of the 90-cow herd. In the years since, Multi-Rose Jerseys has undergone two major herd expansions and added two additional family members to the corporation. Though some of those years were more ideal for expanding the business than others, Multi-Rose Jerseys has had the misfortune of making changes during some of the dairy industry's most challenging times.

The Metzgers took their first leap of faith in 2002 when they expanded the herd to 500 cows. That year, milk prices fell to their second lowest level in two decades. Two other brothers, Brett and Evan, came on board in 2009 and 2010—back-to-back years that were even more financially devastating for the dairy industry. The herd was expanded a second time to its current size of 1,500 cows last year, amidst sky-high feed prices brought on by drought. Multi-Rose Jerseys has weathered the storm by running a tight ship and adopting technology that saves time and labor.

"We have been on a fast learning curve the past dozen years," said Dana. "This operation is both a business and a way of life. Every aspect of its operation is important because every little thing that happens is multiplied by 1,500—the number of cows in our milking herd."



Dana Metzger

Automation, data collection and analysis are key components for improving profits at Multi-Rose Jerseys. Facility improvements have been made with these in mind. The new barn that was constructed in 2002 for the first herd expansion featured the latest technology for moving cattle and monitoring their activity. Cows are milked in a 40-stall, rotary parlor with automatic take-offs and milk meters and pedometers by AfiMilk. Cows with high activity that are at least 45 days fresh and not coded pregnant are automatically sorted to the management rail for breeding each day.

Cows are housed in a freestall barn with six rows of freestalls, a drive-through feed alley and slatted floor. Mattresses are used in the freestalls and bedded every other day with separated manure solids, which are processed on the farm. Cows are fed a single TMR twice a day. The ration is BMR corn silage, haylage, dry hay, straw, cottonseed, ground corn and a protein blend.

Calves are housed in an old hog barn

that was renovated for calf rearing from birth through weaning. The barn is power-ventilated and features a raised floor made of wire mesh. Five automatic calf feeders supply milk to 10 pens of calves. At eight weeks-of-age, calves are moved to a shed with a bedded pack. At 12 weeks-of-age, they are moved to a neighboring facility with a shed and bedded pack and introduced to a TMR with fence-line feeding. When they are three months pregnant, they return to the home farm. They are housed in a hoop barn with a bedded pack and fed at the fence-line.

The three biggest labor-savers at Multi-Rose Jerseys are the slatted cow barn floors, which do not require daily scraping, the pedometers, which aid in heat detection, and the automatic calf feeders, which eliminate the need for bottle feeding.

Metzger also uses an extensive number of benchmarks to evaluate and fine-tune business performance. A key strategy is to tap the reproductive advantages of the Jersey cow.

"For us, reproduction drives production, which drives profit," Metzger noted.

Dana is especially mindful of the herd's benchmarks for age at first calving (24 months), days to first breeding (68 days), pregnancy rate (26%) and calving interval (12.7 months). Multi-Rose Jerseys averages 2.8 services per conception using sexed semen for first services on most cows.

By paying attention to reproduction, production for Multi-Rose Jerseys has not skipped a beat despite the myriad of challenges that come with expansion. In 2001, the lactation average for the herd stood at 18,280 lbs. milk, 884 lbs. fat and 669 lbs. protein on 104 cows. Two years later, it reached 19,945 lbs. milk, 1,022 lbs. fat and 699 lbs. protein on 350 cows. Six of the past 10 years, Multi-Rose Jerseys has ranked among the top 10 herds in the nation among its peers with similar-sized herds. A goal for Metzger is to increase daily milk production to 60 lbs. milk per cow or more while maintaining components.

Though Metzger got a start in his career on the business end of the cow at age 10 doing evening milkings, he takes a special interest in genetics. He was among the first to heavily use G-code bulls, which now account for about 60% of the herd matings.

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Sexed semen is used for first services on most cows and first and second services on heifers. Multi-Rose Jerseys extensively uses embryo transfer and in-vitro fertilization to grow the high-end of the herd internally, with eight cows in the donor dam program at any given time. Most of the resulting bulls calves will be genotyped by A.I. organizations for potential contracts. A third of the heifer calves in the calf pens are P-level 7 or higher; 34 of them rank on the current lists of the top heifers for GJPI or PA JPI.

Metzger mates the lower end of the herd to limousine bulls. He plans to increase levels to 20-30% to grow this revenue stream, which is more profitable than feeding out lower-end replacements from the Jersey herd.

Though replacements have been needed in the past because the dairy was in a growing mode, Metzger would now like to merchandise high-end genetics more heavily and eventually hold a production sale.

Multi-Rose Jerseys has been a model for other dairy producers as well. The dairy was a tour stop for the annual meetings of the American Jersey Cattle Association (AJCA) and National All-Jersey and host farm for the North American Intercollegiate Dairy Challenge in 2007 and hosted the annual evaluator's conference for Select Sires' Select Mating Service last year.

Metzger is a third-generation Jersey breeder who received the Young Jersey Breeder Award from the AJCA in 2007. He has served on the Northwest Iowa DHIA board and is active in the Lyon County Dairy Association, Iowa Farm Bureau and the Western Dairy Alliance.

He and his wife, Kary, have five children: Jeremy, 7; Daniel, 5; Heidi, 3; Lena, 22 months; and Bethany, born in August. Long term, Metzger plans to financially prepare the business to transition it the next generation, just as his grandparents and parents have done.

Past Jersey recipients include Andrew and Lynette Buttles, Lancaster, Wis. (2010); Brian and Heidi Lantzky, Hawkeye, Iowa (2009); Richard and Jennifer Avila, Dalhart, Texas (2009); Kip Keller and Robin Denniston-Keller, Byron, N.Y. (2008); C. A. and Kristen Russell, Hilmar, Calif. (2007); Scott Bohnert, East Moline, Ill. (2006); Leroy C. Clark and Michelle Wiegart, Spring Valley, Wis. (2002); and Kelvin "Kelly" Moss, Litchfield, Ariz. (2001).