

Milk yield a vital part of farm output for IHFA chair Whelan

Richard Whelan recently replaced Liam Curran as chairman of the IHFA. Here, he tells **Jack Kennedy** about his goals for the Association and running his own dairy enterprise at Clonard, Co Meath

JACK KENNEDY
DAIRYING EDITOR

ON FARM

with ...
Richard Whelan
Clonard, Co Meath

Just three weeks ago, Richard Whelan sold 30 calves and weanling heifer calves at his on farm sale. All young stock, born between March 2007 and May 2008, were sold for an average price of €2,850. The Meath man has recently taken over from Liam Curran as chairman of the Irish Holstein Friesian Association (IHFA).

Two weekends later, Richard claimed first prize with a second lactation cow at Charleville show. The Charleville winner is out of bull called 'Cousto', a Canadian sire (€100 EBI), with Addison and Bellwood further back the line. She classified 'Excellent' as a second calver, producing 13,000kg of milk (at 4.91% fat and 3.32% protein).

When I called, she was milking 62kg/day, inside on a diet of maize etc, in preparation for shows later in the summer. On top of this, Richard's herd has been placed first in four consecutive years in the national herds competition.

YOUNG STOCK

The above paragraphs summarise Richard Whelan's dairy enterprise at Clonard. In summary, selling young stock boosts farm output. Bought-in feed is not limited, with milk yield an important issue in farm output (7,000kg/cow), and cows are milked all year round. While it's not the system you can recommend to most dairy farmers, Richard says it works for him. Milk from grass only is "not on," according to Richard. "You will get yield short-term but it is not possible to hold onto yield," he maintains.

When I called, the Lumville herd were lying in the best of lush, green grass during the day and offered a Total Mixed Ration (TMR) including 15kg of maize silage, 5kg of Brewer's grains and 5kg mixed between beet pulp, soya and rolled wheat with 1kg of straw at night. Cows are let go outside during the night.

In another month or two, when 20 acres of homegrown maize is gone, Richard will introduce some round-baled silage into the diet. Richard is milking 50 cows all year

round (calving 50:50 spring autumn) with 80 acres grazing around the parlour and 50 acres rented, three miles away. Last week, the Lumville herd were averaging 39.8kg at 3.64% fat and 3.28% protein or 2.7kg of milk solids/cow/day. Other seasonal herds on grazed grass were only producing 1.4kg of milk solids/cow from grass only. If you have the land and don't have the quota then, obviously, grass-based milk makes more economic sense.

Richard is upset that the Holstein Friesian has been classed as a breed that is poor for fertility. He said: "There are lines or families within every breed that are poor for fertility and I believe farmers can select within the Holstein Friesian for better fertility."

Another point that annoys Richard is some of the yields that are reported from research trials, showing Holstein Friesians only milking 1kg or 2kg, on average, above comparison breeds. "These results do not fairly reflect the milk yields that can be achieved from Holstein Friesian cows," he said.

As I have him on a roll, I ask about crossbreeding. No stopping him now — "Crossbreeding is an option for some if they want it. I tried it and moved away from it. I'm in a different system. I wouldn't milk more cows with less yield as there is only so much work I can do."

Surely milk yield is not the driver, I suggested, and profit must be important. "There are horses for courses. If you have the land, then you can reduce milk yield and make more profit with lower costs. Not everyone needs 62kg but middle ground around 35kg is necessary."

I put it to Richard that Brian Wickham and ICBF might not be impressed with some of his recent correspondence in the media regarding breeding objectives and suggestions that Holsteins are better than any other dairy breed. Richard is on the



ABOVE: The champion cow at Mallow, sired by a Canadian bull 'Cousto'.

ABOVE RIGHT: The Lumville herd lying in lush grass during the day have access to a TMR, before going out after evening milking.

TOP: Richard Whelan, Clonard, Co Meath, who is IHFA chair.

“ I'd like to see a better working relationship with ICBF, Teagasc and other parties. I would like to see our membership and registration grow. I would like ordinary farmers to upgrade their own herds. Whether they join the social life associated with local IHFA clubs is up to individual choice

board of ICBF. He was quick to retort: "Oh no, my relationship with Brian Wickham and ICBF is very good and we maintain clear lines of communication."

"We, in the IHFA, believe there are more records within the ICBF database that would benefit our organisation if ICBF were willing to release this data. Other countries display much more and better information on Holstein Friesian milk yields for different categories of the breed. I will be discussing this with Brian Wickham."

Recently, IHFA commissioned Northern Ireland scientists to determine if one EBI index was good enough for all breeds and cows. The researchers came back with the answer that, yes, one index was good enough. Richard said: "Trying to establish whether one index is enough has been a long road and I think the end of the road is near. Having said

that, there are discrepancies within the EBI model that need to be ironed out.

"It's not what every one of my members wants, but it's the next step. While one index is definitely the way forward, I would like to see a table of superior cows and bulls within a system. Northern Ireland scientists suggest 7,000kg to 8,000kg yields are optimum for spring production systems. EBI was built for a grass-based spring milk production system. Obviously, I am not farming in that system."

What's your main gripe with the EBI? "If I were to mention one, it has to be that too much of the EBI is coming from parental information rather than what the cow herself produces. I would argue that farmers need to look within the EBI figure to where the final EBI figure is coming from. Is it fertility, milk or what?"

Would you use high EBI

bulls? "Yes, I have used OMAN as a sire and I sold OMAN daughters in my sale a few weeks back. While they had high EBI, they didn't sell for the best money."

"Hardly surprising," I said. He agreed and smiled. Richard sold animals to Cork, Kerry, Limerick and Northern Ireland. His midlands location also attracts buyers from Northern Ireland.

I asked Richard for his goals as chairman of IHFA. He thought long and hard. "I definitely would like to see a better working relationship with ICBF, Teagasc and interested parties. I would like to see our membership and registration grow."

Last year IHFA had 3,700 signed up members and 75,000 registrations.

"Thirdly, I would like ordinary farmers to upgrade their own herds. Whether they join the social life associated with local IHFA clubs is up to individual choice."