



John & Lisa Black

When District 5 OYDC John Black graduated from the Ag Tech Dairy Management course at Michigan State University, the fifth generation dairy farmer began to slowly add registered Holsteins to his family's dairy herd. He bought his first registered cow soon after graduation. The cow brought good genetics to the herd and produced well, but unbeknownst to John and the seller, she was also carrying John's Disease.

When John bought the infected cow 16 years ago, John's was not a commonly known disease and most dairy farmers were not aware of the devastation it could cause in their herds. In fact, John was not terribly concerned about the first positive John's test he received. By the time he understood the impact John's was having on his herd it was nearly too late.

"John's really messes herds up," John says. "It is a cycle that keeps going and only gets worse until you put the brakes on."

John manages the Howard City area farm he and his wife, Lisa, own in partnership with his mother, Grace, and aunt, Phyllis.

At first, he thought the techniques a state veterinarian recommended to reduce the spread of John's were too complicated to use on the farm, choosing instead to ignore the problem. As the disease spread through the Blacks' herd, even the two-year-old heifers began to show clinical signs of John's.

"The winter of 1998 was the worst, we ended up culling 1/3 of our new heifers because they were showing clinical signs of John's," John says. "That's when it really struck me. We had to do something or we are not going to continue dairying."

Testing the whole herd for the disease was cost prohibitive at the time, so John decided to implement John's reducing management practices. He started by removing the calves from the cows and feeding artificial colostrum and milk replacer. Prior to that, colostrum was pooled and fed to the calves.

"It was a challenge when we first switched to replacer for milk and colostrum," John says. "For a while, we had problems and lost some calves." Today, John and Lisa's son, Jordan, 13, is in charge

of calf care. He feeds colostrum from John's negative dams to only their calves. He also feeds a microbial product to the calves that has nearly eliminated scours. "We haven't lost a heifer calf in 2 1/2 years," John adds.

When the reasonably-priced John's Milk ELISA test was introduced by AntelBio, John tested the whole herd. Once he knew who the positive cows were, he took an aggressive stance in order to reduce disease from his herd. John's positive cows were not bred back and removed from the herd.

To prevent the spread of John's to the young stock, calves are raised until they are a year old at John and Lisa's farmstead, located about a half mile away from the dairy.

"It creates a nice break in the cycle of the disease," John explains. "There is little chance for feces contamination when they are here."

With John's disease in check, John is now able to focus more on the future of the farm instead of just trying to keep the cows alive. Five years ago, the Blacks had 90 average producing cows

with average quality milk. Today, the farm's 120 healthy cows are achieving high production and good milk quality.

"I just dried off our first cow that ever gave 40,000 pounds in a 305 day lactation and bred back in 120 days," John says. "This is the first year that I feel I am running a progressive dairy farm since the John's was diagnosed. This is also the first year we've culled for milk production in 10 years. Before, it was always for herd health reasons. Our cull rate has dropped to 25 percent now that the John's is behind us."

John attributes a number of improvements to the farm's newfound success. Elimination of John's disease plays a big role, but a new, more comfortable, freestall barn built in late 2000 and changes in feeding practices also make a difference.

"We started feeding microbials to the cows about the same time they moved into the freestall barn," John says. "When the rumen functions well and the rumen pH is maintained, that translates into a productive cow that is very healthy."

John is so pleased with the effect microbials has had on the herds' health that he now treats the corn silage and haylage as well as adding a microbial to the TMR. These changes have increased feed efficiencies, allowing John to rely more on forages he raises on the farm instead of purchased proteins.

"I am getting close to an 80 pound tank average from the cows while feeding 63 percent forages and milking twice a day using no BST," John says. "With cows on more forages, the risk of acidosis also goes down."

The microbials allow the cows to better utilize forages. It has also made John more aware of the types of forages he is feeding the cows. He mixes tall fescue and

rye grass with the alfalfa, which brings the ADF and NDF down and increases the energy level.

"I started mixing high energy grasses with the alfalfa which helped improve forage quality," John says. "The cows can digest high energy grasses much easier and I don't have to cut the hay incredibly early to ensure quality. The cows are getting enough energy from the forages to maintain a high level of milk production while being fed lower levels of concentrate."

In the summer, John lets the cows harvest the forages themselves through rotational grazing in 10 paddocks that cover about 5 acres each. All dry cows and heifers are pastured until a week prior to freshening, all year long. Keeping them out on pasture year-round is a practice that evolved over time because, John says, it is what works well on their farm.

"Having the dry cows and heifers on pasture is healthier for them and more labor efficient for me," John explains. "It is much easier for me to sit on a tractor seat and feed them then put them in a barn, bed them and feed them.

We have no respiratory problems as long as vaccines are kept up to date. It is also much more cost efficient. I have no doubt that I can raise a 2 year old heifer for \$1,000."

The Blacks plan to expand the current herd to 200 cows in the near future, which will accommodate John's cousins who plan to join the farm. They also plan to install a new manure pit and build a new parlor.

"With our current inventory of 115 heifers, using sexed semen and our cull rate down to 25 percent we feel that we will be able to expand to our 200 cow goal from internal growth," John says.

John and Lisa are members of the Alma Local. John is president of the Montcalm County Farm Bureau. The Blacks are 4-H dairy leaders and organized an annual ice cream social during the livestock sale at the Montcalm County Fair. Lisa works full time as a medical assistant at a local doctors office. Her employment provides medical insurance for the family, something that has been very beneficial for the couple.



The Black family: Lisa, John and Jordan.