

MMPA's Top Quality Award Winners



Ron and Beth Litwiller always told their sons, "If it is worth doing, it is worth doing it right." Their son Kevin listened carefully to those words. After less than 5 years of dairy farming on his own, he achieved MMPA's Top Quality Award for 2005 with average quality counts of 71,083 somatic cell count; 1,167 PI count and 1,000 raw bacteria count. These averages were the best among MMPA's over 1,600 member farms.

The Litwillers farm in Perinton on the same farm, but both Kevin and his father manage separate herds of cattle. Kevin runs the 60-cow dairy herd he owns with his father while Ron operates a beef feedlot and cow-calf operation, in addition to a livestock trucking business. The pair stays busy running their own operations but help each other out whenever it is needed.

"If either one of us need help, we can help each other out because we are on the same farm," Ron says. "I enjoy it and I think he does too, it really makes you appreciate each other."

Kevin is a fourth generation

dairy farmer and says he always knew he wanted to follow in the family tradition. While growing up, Kevin and his two brothers milked for their dad. As the boys got older and began spending less time working on the farm, Ron got burned out and decided it was time to sell the dairy cows and focus on his beef operation. He sold most of the herd in December 1999.

"I had an idea I wanted to milk but wasn't ready when dad sold his cows," Kevin says.

Kevin and Ron saved about 85 heifers from the dairy herd. As the cows freshened, the Litwillers sent them to nearby dairy farms owned by Randy Litwiller and Doug Wesenberg. Kevin worked at several dairy farms in the area, saving money and learning different management philosophies until he could start his own dairy farm.

"I learned so much working for so many other farmers," Kevin says. "You get so many ideas you can pick up. One place I was working even took a few fresh heifers for me so I got to milk my own cows every once in awhile."

Kevin worked on 5 or 6 dairy farms during that time, doing chores and fill in milking. He milked for his uncle two mornings a week on a regular basis and feels what he learned there helped him achieve high quality milk with his herd.

"He always made sure I did a good job and checked up on me," Kevin says, adding that his uncle stressed consistency and proper milking procedures.

In September 2000, Kevin started dairy farming by himself using the freestall barn and milking parlor at his parents' farm. Between the fresh heifers he kept from his dad's herd and a few purchased cows, Kevin began milking 13 cows.

Kevin admits he is a stickler for details and can be very particular when it comes to caring for and milking his cows. He milks his current herd of 60 grade Holsteins, Jerseys and crosses by himself twice a day, every day. In fact, he had performed every milking for 2 years straight until he had to take the day off to be recognized along with his father, Ron, as the MMPA Top Quality Award Winners at the

2006 Annual Delegate Meeting in March.

"I am really proud of Kevin," Ron says. "I knew he was doing a good job, but I didn't know he was that good." Ron adds that quality milk is also a tradition for the Litwiller family, something Ron and his father strove for when they were milking cows.

Kevin achieves good quality milk by being consistent and paying attention to little details in every area of the farm. Kevin does all the milking and is careful to follow the same routine with all cows.

"I think consistency is the most important thing," Kevin says. "I am the only one milking so I know I do it the same way every time."

The same milking routine is followed when Kevin milks the cows twice daily in a double 8 parallel parlor. He does not wear gloves during the milking routine.

1. Udders are dry wiped with a common towel until towel gets dirty.
2. Udder is wet wiped with an individual paper towel dipped in Idophor II udder wash, purchased from MMPA Merchandise and mixed with hot water in a 2 gallon pail.
3. Milking unit is attached.
4. Teats are post-dipped in 1 percent iodine after automatic take-offs remove milking unit.

While he is performing the milking procedure, Kevin checks for udder problems that could signal mastitis.

"If I see anything in the milker or if she seems overly sensitive, swollen or just doesn't look right I will check her by hand stripping first," Kevin says.

At that point, Kevin doesn't automatically treat the cow for mastitis with antibiotics, basing

his decision to treat or not on whether he thinks the problem is an injury or infection. He estimates having 12 or fewer cases of mastitis in the past year.

"Some cases were from injuries when I let the cows out in the spring," Kevin says. "In those cases, I would hand strip until the milk is clear or use a quarter milker. If they have much swelling, I usually end up treating them with antibiotics. Most of the time I don't have any trouble getting rid of mastitis from the first treatment."

I am not sure where good quality milk starts but I do know where it ends – when I leave the stalls too long or when something breaks in the parlor. – Kevin Litwiller

Kevin monitors the herd's somatic cell count using MMPA quality reports that are automatically faxed to him a few times a week. Receiving quality information more often has been useful to Kevin since MMPA's Novi Lab began component and quality testing every available bulk tank milk sample.

"The new reports are better," Kevin says. "I was running once a week specials so I would get a report about every two days, but now I don't have to and I can watch the SCC more closely."

If a report shows a high count, Kevin immediately looks at his dairy breeding wheel and checks the cows that just freshened for that tank. He will pre-strip those cows and perform a CMT test on any that he suspects may have problems. He does not automatically CMT test all fresh cows, but keeps their milk from the tank for about 3-4 milkings after freshening.

To keep the cows healthy, Kevin follows a vaccination program.

Because they reside on the same farm and drink from the same water source, both Kevin and Ron use the same vaccination schedule for their cows.

"I also give them 3,000 IU of vitamin E each day mixed with their feed to keep their immune systems strong," Kevin says.

All cows are treated with Tomorrow at dry off and teats are dipped with an exterior teat barrier. Cows and heifers are inseminated and tracked using a dairy breeding wheel. A bull is not used on the farm for safety reasons.

Cleanliness, consistency and attention to detail in all areas of the farm help keep milk quality high, something Kevin is very particular about. Freestalls are sand bedded and changed or added to as needed. Alleys are scraped twice daily. In the parlor, Kevin makes sure the milking system is functioning properly by cleaning the regulator filter every four weeks and having the regulator cleaned and rebuilt on a yearly basis by his IBA representative, Rick Rademacher. Every three months, Rick replaces milk inflations and performs a vacuum system check.

"I am not sure where good quality milk starts but I do know where it ends – when I leave the stalls too long or when something breaks in the parlor," Kevin says. "I have been accused of being too particular, but as dad and mom have always said, if it's worth doing, it's worth doing right."

In addition to the award plaque Kevin and Ron were presented with at the MMPA Annual Meeting, they also receive a \$100 gift certificate towards MMPA Member Merchandise. Their name will be added to the Quality Award Winners plaque hanging in the Novi office.