

Determined to Dairy

OYDC runner-ups Doeke and Melissa Prins
work hard to live out their dream



In 2001, Melissa (Bigler) Prins was working for her brother and sister in-law, Jeff and Alisha Bigler, when they were named MMPA OYDC Runners-Up. At the time, Melissa had no idea that within 5 years she would leave her brother's farm to marry a dairy farmer, with whom she, too, would also be chosen as MMPA OYDC Runners-Up.

It all started when Rex Lombard, the milk hauler that serves both the Prins and Bigler farms, tried to fix Doeke and Melissa up.

"I asked Rex – Does he have a parlor? If he doesn't, then I am not interested," Melissa says. Despite the lack of a parlor, Melissa and Doeke did meet and soon decided to get married.

Doeke and Melissa were married in October 2004. As her brother's only employee, Melissa agreed to continue working on the Bigler farm through December until her replacement was trained. When she returned home each evening and on her Sundays off, she helped Doeke with chores. That arrangement was cut short when Doeke fell off the tank spreader, breaking one arm, hurting his neck and spraining his other arm.

"I had to come home and milk then," Melissa says. "Doeke was still trying to help milk when he was injured."

Doeke's determination to milk and work while injured is a product of his enthusiasm and love for dairy farming coupled with an amazingly positive attitude. He was raised in the Netherlands where his father had a dairy farm when Doeke was very young. His father retired from

dairy farming in the late 70s, and brought the entire family to the United States to look for a farm. When his mother said “no,” the family returned to the Netherlands.

Even a little exposure to agriculture was enough to whet Doeke’s appetite for farming. He spent a year as an exchange student working on a dairy farm in Michigan, feeding his desire to have his own farm. Upon returning to the Netherlands, Doeke began saving money to buy a farm, despite knowing that he would not be able to afford one in his own country.

“I always wanted to start my own farm,” Doeke says. “I saved money while working in a slaughterhouse, then looked for farms in Germany, Poland and Romania.”

When he could not find a farm, he decided the next best thing was to work on a farm, so he began working for an agricultural temporary service. The service assigned Doeke to farms where he would perform various tasks when the owners were sick or away on vacation. One placement included a stint at an AI station. Doeke still has a framed photo of his “first born” – a calf that was the result of his first AI.

“I got a lot of experience with the agriculture service,” Doeke explains. “The last placement I was at was on a dairy farm where they were ready to retire. I did just about everything there and learned a lot.”

Soon after his last placement, the farmer Doeke had worked for in Michigan contacted him, asking if he would be interested in looking at farms in Michigan. Doeke made the trip overseas, and found the 80 acre farm he and Melissa now own.

“The owner was only interested in selling the barn and cows, he kept the cropland to farm himself,” Doeke says. The Prinses purchase most of their herd’s feed from the previous owner and utilize his fields for spreading manure.

Doeke purchased the Lakeview area dairy farm, complete with 76 cows and a stanchion barn in August 2003. He bought 14 additional cows, soon after. Through internal replacements, the Prinses plan to have at least 110 cows by the end of this year.

“We are making an addition to the existing freestall barn that will hold 150 milk cows,” Doeke says. Portions of the current freestall barn will also be remodeled to make feeding easier.

A double-6 herringbone milking parlor, which came into the works shortly after the couple met, was completed in May 2005. It is a huge improvement over the old stanchion barn, the Prinses say.

“We used to milk 88 cows in the stanchion which took 4 hours,” Melissa recalls. “Now we milk 90 cows in 2 hours in the parlor.”

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A closer Look



Prins Dairy Farm

Doeke & Melissa Prins

Location: Lakeview, Michigan

MMPA Members of: MMPA District 5 and the Alma Local

Herd Size: 95 milking and dry

Replacements: 35

Acres Farmed: 80 acres, they purchase most of the cows’ feed

Milking set-up: double-6 herringbone parlor

Agriculture and dairy involvement: Melissa is a United Dairy Industry of Michigan (UDIM) Dairy Diplomat and Doeke assists in her duties.

The thing that makes a difference on our farm is: We are neat and clean and strict to avoid making mistakes that cost a lot of money. It has to be clean, it has to be done now, and you can’t leave it until tomorrow.

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Since taking over the farm, Doeke has diligently worked to improve herd health and the overall cleanliness of the farm. He is stickler for details and does not wait to complete a project tomorrow that should be done today.

“From the beginning, I want to work neat and clean and strict,” Doeke says. “You can’t think, ‘I will do that tomorrow,’ because you can lose more that way. It has to be clean, it has to be done now – those are the good things we do here.” For instance, Doeke explains that it is better to trim a lame cow right away instead of waiting until she develops further problems.

The Prinses are very picky about their milking routine. They stress consistency in milking and make sure to wash the milkers of high Somatic Cell Count (SCC) cows after milking them. They also called upon their MMPA Member Representative Katie Pierson and her supervisor Jack Sticker, who helped the Prinses perform a whole herd test. A few high count cows were sold soon after.

“When I came here the quality premiums were from 10 to 20 cents,” Doeke says. “Now we are getting 30 cent premiums.” At the time of purchase, the herd’s SCC was between 200,000 and 300,000. Today, the herd’s SCC ranges near 120,000 and has been as low as 80,000. The farm earned MMPA Bronze Quality Awards in 2004 and 2005, and Doeke already has his sights set on silver or gold in the future.

Even though Doeke’s family lives in the Netherlands, his parents and siblings have come to the farm to help make improvements. His parents will soon return to help out when Doeke and Melissa have their first child in November.

“My dad is very proud of me and what we are doing here and how the farm is going,” Doeke says. “When he comes here he helps us farm and really likes it.”

Becoming an OYDC

Contact your MMPA Local Soon to apply for 2007 OYDC Program

Since 1950, MMPA has been identifying future leaders through the Outstanding Young Dairy Cooperator program. The program has seen some changes over the years, but the basic purpose of identifying and developing future dairy industry leaders has remained.

Purpose of MMPA’s OYDC Program

- To strengthen leadership abilities in young farmers.
- To broaden young farmers’ knowledge of milk marketing and MMPA.
- To recognize the abilities and stewardship of our young dairy farmers.

OYDC Selection

All MMPA locals are encouraged to submit a nominee for the OYDC program. Nominees must be:

- A member of MMPA or actively involved in the dairy farm operation of a member.
- Less than 41 years of age as of January 1 in the contest year. If running as a couple, the age requirement applies to the younger spouse.

All local nominees are sent an application form. After the application forms are filled out and sent back to the MMPA Novi office, the application forms are then sent to the respective district secretaries. The district secretaries convene the district nominating committee (consisting of one delegate from each of the locals within the district). The district nominating committee

selects a nominee to represent their district at the State OYDC Conference.

The State OYDC Conference is a 2 1/2 day conference for all District OYDC representatives that takes place in Novi, usually during the first couple of weeks of August. Participants have the opportunity to gain a much broader understanding of various industry and association issues. Three judges are designated to select one OYDC nominee and a runner-up to represent MMPA at various industry and association activities.

If you are interested in being nominated as an OYDC, contact your MMPA local officers. For additional information regarding the OYDC program, contact MMPA’s Member Relations department at (248) 474-6672.