

The Next Chapter

The 2008 MMPA OYDCs Brad and Tonia Ritter



Like most young people heading to college, Brad Ritter was ready to take on a new chapter in his life, developing some independence and planning for his future. What he didn't expect was a whole new book to unfold based on his two years in the Ag Tech Program at Michigan State University. Before leaving for college, Brad planned to return home to Byron, Mich. to farm with his father, Jim. Admittedly, Brad was not much of a "cow guy" at the time, preferring the tractor over the parlor, but a few good Ag Tech classes piqued his interest and challenged him to do better on his own farm.

During his Ag Tech days Brad also joined the Dairy Club and the dairy judging team, where he met his future wife, Tonia Koppelaar. Tonia, a four-year student majoring in Agricultural Communications, was from a small dairy farm across the state in Ottawa County. While the two began dating in college, it would be several years before they married. After college, Tonia moved to Kansas City, Missouri, to work for a public relations firm on agricultural accounts, followed by a move to St. Louis, Missouri, to work with Monsanto. After four years away from home, Tonia returned to Michigan working in the governmental affairs division of Michigan Farm Bureau.

"Working for Monsanto was a neat experience. I learned about the dairy industry from an industry-wide perspective and saw a lot of dairies throughout the country," Tonia says. "But, ultimately, I found the job to not be as satisfying as actually helping more people involved in agriculture."

Their combined interest and commitment to the dairy industry led them to be selected as the 2008 MMPA Outstanding Young Dairy Cooperators. The Ritters, repre-

senting District 6 and the Owosso Local, were chosen as the OYDCs following the annual OYDC Conference held in August. They were selected among the other district OYDCs to represent MMPA at various industry functions including the National Milk Producers Federation Annual Meeting.

Working Within Their Means

After his schooling, Brad returned with a renewed passion to rejuvenate their dairy farm. His new interest in the cattle had him looking more closely at the herd and beginning to gradually increase the herd numbers. Working with his father and grandfather, they scrutinized all the facilities, which were originally built in the 1950s, to determine the most economical and effective way to modernize the dairy.

“We could have built a new million dollar set-up and started over, but I wasn’t willing to take that risk,” Brad says. “So we took each building one by one to see what could be remodeled or what needed to be replaced. Now, everything except the calf hutches on the farm is either new or remodeled.”

The biggest change for the operation was the installation of a new double-eight parallel milking parlor. The parallel parlor replaced a double four-herringbone parlor. With the larger parlor, Brad could expand the herd without increasing the labor force. Today they are milking 160 cows; nearly double what the herd was when Brad finished school.

Brad’s enthusiasm to change and grow the farm was tempered by his grandfather and father’s desire to take things slowly. Having to “prove his points” to the older generation forced him to do his homework on any changes he wanted to make.

“The first thing we did was build a new heifer barn,” Brad says. “Grandpa wasn’t sure it was the right thing to do, but once it was finished he was so proud to show it off to anybody that came around.”

The improved facilities helped decrease the culling rate, allowing them to expand entirely from internal growth.

Changes in Feeding Create Domino Affect

Along with the changes in facilities, the Ritters have also made important changes in cow nutrition. In 2000, they started feeding a TMR to all the cows. Making the transition to the TMR required changes in all aspects of the feeding from storage and handling to equipment used for feeding the cows.

“My dad wasn’t sure it was all going to work because it was all so different from the way we had always done it,” Brad says. “But once we got going he could see how much easier it was and the cows were producing more than 20 pounds a day more in less than year. It is changes like these that let us realize the full potential in the cows. Our rolling herd average is over 27,000.”

~ The Ritters ~



Brad and Tonia Ritter with their sons
Bryce and Trevor

One Thing that Makes a Difference on Our Farm is...

Consistently paying attention to the details has allowed us to improve incrementally while expanding our herd through internal growth.

*~ MMPA Members of ~
District 6
Owosso Local*

*~ Herd size ~
160 milking and dry*

*~ Replacements ~
145*

*~ Acres Farmed ~
400*

*~ Milking Set-Up ~
Double-8 parallel parlor*

~ Ag and Dairy Involvement ~

Brad serves as the MMPA local Vice President and delegate. He is also active in the Shiawassee County Farm Bureau. Tonia is the Manager of the Michigan Farm Bureau State Governmental Affairs Department. They also volunteer with the MSU dairy judging teams and Ag Tech classes.

“Before going to college, I enjoyed working with the cows, but was more focused on getting more land so we could row-crop farm,” Brad says, “Now I think about getting more land so we can add more cows. It is fun to see how much they can improve and how we can keep doing better.”

Along with increasing production, the quality of the herd has also improved. The Ritter Farm is an MMPA 10-Star Quality Award Winner having received an MMPA Quality Milk Award for 10 years.

New Generation—New Challenges

Brad’s grandfather was able to see the modernization of the farm before his death two years ago. Today, Brad and Tonia, along with his parents, Jim and Val, own the farm in a partnership agreement. The next generation of Ritter farm boys are already in place—Brad and Tonia have two sons, Trevor, 3 and Bryce, 2. They are expecting their third child in December.

While Tonia’s career off the farm keeps her from the day-to-day chores, her knowledge and background of the industry is beneficial as they make plans for the future. She also manages the books and farm records. Her daily exposure to rules and regulations affecting the industry helps them to keep informed of the challenges facing the industry.

“The most significant challenge the dairy industry is facing is the court of public and consumer perception about what we do and how we do it in our industry,” Tonia says. “This pertains to environmental issues and spans all the way to animal husbandry practices used in dairy operations.”

To help meet these challenges the Ritters work to keep their facilities up at all times so they can welcome groups to their farm at anytime. They have also modified

some of their production practices to be more environmentally sound and in time hope to become verified through the Michigan Agriculture Environmental Assurance Program.

“The issues feel like a far greater challenge than one dairy farm might impact, and likely they are. However, each individual farm can do things to educate and help others understand. We can do things to connect with our communities and review our management practices for areas of improvement,” Tonia adds. “We can also belong to organizations like MMPA that are in a position to collectively assist the industry in those issues.”



Pictured: (top) A new parlor allows the Ritters to expand the herd without adding more employees. (middle) The youngest Ritters—Trevor and Bryce. (Bottom) Brad and his dad Jim (pictured) with Tonia and his mom, Val run the third generation farm in a partnership agreement.