

Persistence Pays

2008 MMPA District 5 OYDC Mark and Katrina Bontekoe



As a former college football player, it's likely Mark Bontekoe heard the phrase "never give up" countless times. Mark and his wife, Katrina have the same attitude when it comes to dairy farming. Their persistent spirit helped them realize their goal of building a brand new dairy facility as well as earning them accolades for improved milk production.

When Mark and Katrina decided to split their cows from Mark's family's dairy herd, the couple found a retired dairy farm to house the cows at, hoping to soon build a new facility on vacant land Mark owned in Marion. Once the herd was well established, the Bontekoes felt it was time to take the next step and begin constructing their new permanent facility.

Armed with a solid business plan, Mark and Katrina went to the bank to secure financing for their new facility, only to be told their debt to asset ratio was too large. The couple went back again after six months and heard the same disappointing answer.

"You don't have a lot of assets when you've been in business for four years," Mark explains.

The couple did own a new house in a subdivision, so they decided to sell it and purchase a small modular home for a fraction of the house's cost, planning to live on the land where they would build the dairy.

"We'd been turned down three times by farm credit," Mark says. "I think they decided that if we were willing to sell our home—we'd be OK to lend to."

In December 2006, the cows moved into the brand new Touchdown Dairy, and the Bontekoe family—Mark and Katrina, with their two young sons and another on the way—moved into much smaller living quarters than they'd been accustomed to.

Both cows and people are thriving in their new environment. A new, more efficient parlor initially reduced overall milking time. When Mark decided to see how much more milk production he could get by going to a 3X milking schedule, the parlor time increased a bit over the 2X schedule, but was still no longer than they had spent milking in the old rented facility.

“We began 3X milking in June 2007 to increase production,” Mark says. “We tried it to see what would happen and we got 15 additional pounds of milk right away, so we decided we would never quit.”

In 2002, the Bontekoe herd had a rolling average of 20,500 pounds of milk. Moving to a new, more cow comfortable facility, switching to 3X milking and striving to continually improve herd genetics, all contributed to a significant increase in milk production. Today, the herd boasts a rolling average of 25,515 pounds of milk. For their impressive improvements in production and dollar value, Touchdown Dairy was named the 2008 NorthStar Cooperative DHI Services Progressive Dairy (the Bontekoes will be featured as the Progressive Dairy in the March issue of the *Messenger*).

The Bontekoes are also excited about achieving another impressive goal they had set for the farm—having a bull go to A.I. stud service.

“We wanted to breed a bull that will make an impact on the entire Holstein breed through the A.I. program,” Mark says. “We already have some on the ground that are headed to A.I. once they pass their health checks.”

About 40 percent of the Bontekoe’s herd are registered Holsteins. Mark is responsible for breeding and keeping cow records, allowing him to keep a close eye on genetic improvements in the herd.

“We use embryo transfers to improve genetics,” Mark explains. “We flush four to five of our top cows each year along with using purchased embryos.”

Touchdown Dairy was built to easily allow for facility expansion and increases in cow numbers. The Bontekoes would soon like to build separate dry cow and heifer facilities.

As far as human living arrangements go, the Bontekoes have house plans drawn up and are hoping to break ground on their new home within the next year. Raising three young boys in such a small space can be challenging, but Katrina says it’s worth it just to be on the farm.

“I remember writing a note to my college friend, telling her we had visited the farm that day like we were taking a trip to the zoo,” Katrina recalls of time spent with the boys when they lived in the other house. “It just didn’t seem right. It is a lot nicer having the farm in the background.”

With both cows and people in the same proximity, the Bontekoe children are able to experience farm life around the clock. The older boys enjoy helping Mark in the milking parlor and say they really like being on the farm.

Touchdown Dairy



Mark and Katrina Bontekoe, with their children: Owen, 7, Brant, 5 and Damion, 2.

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

This is a brand new farm. We didn’t have old buildings to use, be in the way or hold sentimental value.

~ *MMPA Member of* ~

District 5

Evart local

~ *Herd size* ~

150 milking and dry

~ *Replacements* ~

120

~ *Acres Farmed* ~

500

~ *Milking Set-Up* ~

Double 10 parallel parlor

~ *Ag and Dairy Involvement* ~

Through MMPA, Mark has served as an alternate delegate since 2004. He served as a District 5 delegate last year. Mark serves on the District VII Holstein Association Board of Directors and has received the Holstein Association’s Progressive Breeder Award in 2005, 2006, 2007 and 2008. He formerly served as the Osceola County Farm Bureau board president and has served on various county and state Farm Bureau committees. In the community, Mark serves as the Osceola County Soil Conservation Secretary. Katrina serves as treasurer of the Marion Fair and the District VII Holstein Association. She is a Certified Public Accountant and works full time as the Business Coordinator for the Wexford-Missaukee ISD.