

MMPA Top Quality Award Winners

For nearly 20 years, MMPA has recognized the member farm producing the highest-quality milk among the MMPA membership. Each year, the battle for the top spot gets tighter. For the first time ever, two MMPA member farms tied for the Top Quality Award. Those two farms—Kevin Cavanaugh's dairy farm and the Michigan State University Dairy Farm, both members of MMPA's District 4—are featured on these pages. While the two farms did not have the exact same numbers, the weighted calculation used between the test scores is what determined the tie.

Kevin Cavanaugh



Kevin Cavanaugh and his employees are proof that achieving and maintaining quality premium levels doesn't require high-tech milking machines or expensive gadgets, it simply requires a commitment to doing things right every time a milker is put on. Kevin's back-to-back awards for the Top Quality Milk Award for Michigan Milk Producers Association is evidence of a system that works and a workforce that works to do it right.

Kevin, who holds an off-farm job, relies on his daughter, Sarah, employee, Jody Jones, and some part-time milkers to do most of the milking. He readily acknowledges that they are the ones that keep the

quality levels high. "The quality got better when I got out of the parlor," he jokes. "They are more patient and watch the little things better than I did."

"I did send them all to one of the MMPA Milker Training Schools last year and that made a big difference. We just do what they taught us to do. I now send them every year and I went this past spring. If everyone went to the milking schools, and did what they taught, they would all qualify for quality premiums," Kevin adds.

Kevin is the fourth generation in his family to operate the 150-year farm located in Leslie, Mich. His herd of 60 registered Holsteins is known for high-quality, high-producing and genetically sound dairy animals. In addition to receiving MMPA quality awards he has also been recognized by NorthStar DHI for low somatic cell counts and high production.

"I thought after I started working full-time the cows would probably leave, but I really enjoy having them here," Kevin says. "Since I work second-shift, a lot of times I am out in the barn late at night and can catch things I might otherwise miss."

Milking Routine Makes a Difference

The Cavanaugh's milking routine begins with wearing disposable gloves and using individual paper towels. Each cow is pre-dipped, stripped, and wiped clean before the milkers are put on. An iodine-based post-dip is applied after milking.

Kevin's back-to-back quality awards is even more impressive when you consider that just a few years ago his somatic cell count was close to 150,000. This past year his quality levels were on average: 59,833 somatic cell count, 1,000 PI count and a Raw Bacteria Count of 1,083. Once he brought the quality levels down, he and his employees worked to fine-tune the procedures so that they could maintain the levels achieved.

In addition to making changes with the milking routine, Kevin also had Steve Lehman, an MMPA member representative, conduct a systems check on his milking equipment. Steve was able to pinpoint the need for some minor adjustments. Kevin plans to have MMPA out on a regular basis to make sure the equipment is running properly.

The Cavanaugh's milk in a double-4 herringbone parlor. The animals are housed in freestalls that are bedded with sand. They insist

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on animals that will stay in the freestalls and will ship ones that lay in the alley.

“It is really important to keep the animals clean in the freestalls,” Kevin says. “We make sure the stalls are clean and the alleys scraped at each milking. We also singe the udder hair to help keep them cleaner.”

Monitoring the Herd with Regular Testing

Kevin uses DHI testing to keep a close eye on the production and somatic cell count of the herd. He also utilizes the MMPA lab in Novi to run special samples when needed.

“The DHI “hot sheet” is a great way to watch the individual cows,” Kevin says. “I think adding somatic cell counts on all testing was a good move for DHI. It makes it so easy to see problem cows and to track chronic problems.”

“I like to keep on top of it before we have a problem,” Kevin says. “We prestrip all the cows before milking to make sure the milk looks good.”

Kevin recently purchased a PortaSCC testing kit so he can test for SCC levels on the farm. (*see page 32 for more information on the PortaSCC*) He was one of the first to purchase the kits now offered through the MMPA Member Merchandise Program. Although he has not yet had a chance to use them, he is optimistic about their ability to track the quality levels.



Kevin Cavanaugh relies on his daughter Sarah (left) and employee Jody Jones to do most of the milking.

Quality Starts Before Lactation

Kevin believes that maintaining good quality levels starts before the lactation with a good dry period. He likes to dry the cows off at least 45 days before calving so that they have a rest period. He uses dry-cow treatments and T-Hexx, a barrier dip to prevent infections.

“I think using a barrier dip like T-Hexx makes a big difference,” he says. “It does a great job sealing that teat end so nothing gets through.”

If they do have a cow flare-up with mastitis they begin treating her and withhold the milk. They use an on-farm SNAP test to be sure the milk is clear before it goes into the bulk tank. Cows with chronic mastitis will be shipped.

He acknowledges his milk hauler, George Moore, plays a major role in the quality levels. “George does a really good job here,” Kevin adds. “If he doesn’t take a good sample or handle it right, my tests won’t be as good as they can be.”

Dealing with Low Prices

Like all dairy farmers, Kevin is working to balance input costs to offset lower milk prices, but one area he won’t compromise is milk quality.

“Our production is down now because I backed off on some of the protein last fall,” he says. “But we won’t cut corners on quality. It is not really that much

more expensive to make quality milk and we need to have the quality payments.”

“Our goal is a healthy herd,” he adds. “I used to push for really high production but it is hard to get back in the milk price what you pay in additional feeds. I still use good breeding and management to get the most out of the cows without spending a lot of money. I breed for longevity and good type. I want cows that are going to stay in the herd for several lactations. If they can’t go past two lactations I am losing money.”

“Producing quality milk is about paying closer attention to details,” Kevin adds. “Anybody can produce higher quality milk if they work at it. I think we need to insist that all milk have lower somatic cell count. If we got rid of all the high SCC cows out there we would get rid of the surplus milk.”