

Breeding made easier thanks to bull selection app

Dairy farmer: Hill family

Region: Tasmania

Topic: Good Bulls App

Developing a herd of equal stature has meant some careful breeding decisions for the Hill family.

The dairy farmers from South Riana in Tasmania inherited a crossbred herd when they bought the farm five years.

For the business, which includes Brodie, his brother James, their parents Craig and Heather and worker Kwai, size does matter when it comes to limiting cow competition within the herd.

They use Holstein, Jersey and Swedish Red genetics selectively in a bid to build a uniform herd, targeting about 500kg liveweight, and make breeding decisions based on individual cows.

“We are essentially a three-way-cross but with each breed we are chasing certain characteristics,” Brodie said.

He uses DataGene’s Good Bulls App to search for bulls with the traits he is looking for in each breed.

“For example, strength for Jerseys, stature and milk components. With Holsteins we quite frequently go for fertility, udders, feet and calving ease. With the Swedish Reds, at the moment, we are only using a bull called V.Foske, we are into the fourth year of using him.”

The Hills discovered V.Foske through the DataGene Good Bulls Guide. They initially selected him for production but found the sire put more strength and vigour into the cows.

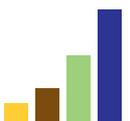
The Good Bulls App, which they have used since its introduction a few years ago, enables the Hills to make all their own breeding decisions. They set filters within the app based on certain traits and the app provides a list of bulls which fit their criteria.

Operating a three-way-cross breeding program means every decision must be calculated. For example, calving ease is a huge factor in the selection of Holstein sires.

“We never select Holsteins with a potentially hard calving because they go over the Jerseys or the smaller animals,” Brodie said. “Fertility is also a big one with Holsteins, we discount anything that is worse than average – straight away – when it comes to fertility.”



James Hill, Kwai Wells, Brodie Hill and Heather Hill, use DataGene’s Good Bulls App at every joining in their crossbred herd.



Brodie said the app allows them to compare sires against each other on the same measure.

“Because we do it all ourselves, the main benefit of the actual app is that it pretty much puts all the bulls on the one platform,” he said. “If you go on the app, you get an unbiased opinion of what we want, especially with stature and components. When it is one platform you can see how they compare and with the app, the online information means it is one level playing field. We make our own selection based on our herd and what we want.”

Impartial information helps the Hill family make more informed decisions, a lot easier.

“If we have the catalogues in front of us, they might say (a sire) has big stature but that doesn’t matter because it might not be comparable (if there is no Australian information),” Brodie said. “For example, is it a big stature in New Zealand or Australia?”

“The app gives us more confidence knowing we are making the right selection. For example, when a bull company representative comes around, you can say ‘I’ve noticed a bull compares like this’; it improves the conversation.”

Bull selection is done on the day of joining via the app. “Every large Holstein gets a Jersey, it’s just what type of Jersey they get,” Brodie said. “All larger-framed Jerseys and smaller-framed Holsteins typically get a red. The smaller-framed Jerseys, crossbreeds or Reds will get a Holstein to ensure size is put back into the progeny.”

Apart from developing an even-sized herd, the Hills remain focused on building cow numbers. They currently milk 450 across a 180ha milking platform. Their business aim is to get to 550-600 cows through increased irrigation development and using run-off areas for the milking herd. Every year they have increased their herd by 50-60 cows. Due to this focus on building numbers, they have kept as many heifers as replacements as possible and been mindful of breeding for longevity.

In-house milk monitors provide an insight into daily production and the family usually herd tested two-to-three times a year. Currently, the herd produces 480-500kg of milk solids a lactation from a pasture-based diet with 1.2-1.5 tonnes a year of grain/cow/lactation.



Brodie Hill uses the Good Bulls App to compare sires on a level playing field.

The Hills previously milked pedigree Holsteins, before Craig and Heather initially retired. It was only when they purchased this current farm, five years ago, that they started crossbreeding. The herd came with the farm and had everything from “tiny little Jerseys to, huge big Holsteins”, Brodie said. They have since embraced crossbreeding for its fertility but also the cows’ ability to handle the harsh north west Tasmanian weather.

“Because of our higher altitude, it can snow quite frequently in August,” Brodie said. Friends suggested they use Swedish Reds because “if the weather was nasty, they were still out grazing”. “Overtime, the crossbreeds have been heartier and aggressive to feed, and they hold condition a bit better,” Brodie said.

Calving is seasonal (spring) with joining to artificial insemination (AI) for six weeks followed by bulls for three weeks. Heifers entered the herd 10 days earlier this year, traditionally it’s one-to-two weeks earlier. Into the future, they want to artificially inseminate all the heifers and then the main herd for only three to four weeks. The remaining animals will then be joined to beef. This has driven the focus on breeding for fertility. This year, the herd recorded a conception rate of about 82% to AI.

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