

## CROSS-BREEDING DAIRY CATTLE IN THE USA - CALIFORNIAN CASE STUDIES

## Study 1 – Kevin Prins

ALTHOUGH he was one of the first of Mike Osmundson's clients to start cross-breeding his cows, Kevin Prins said he was still having a lot of fun seeing the different combination of crosses coming into the herd.



Udder composition is very important for Mr Prins.

But after nine years of using many different types of semen he is also at an important crossroads – the decision of when/if to put his cross-bred cows back to the Holstein.

This is now an issue for many of Mr Osmundson's customers, some of whom are reluctant to return to a breed that they see as the root of all their original problems, regardless of the information coming out of the University of Minnesota about heterosis and hybrid vigour – see page 71.

Instead of swearing off Holsteins for life, Mr Prins said he had decided to take a slightly more scientific approach.

Currently entering the herd are some Holstein-sired heifers and Red Dane-sired heifers, all out of three-way cross-bred cows (Holstein-Montbeliarde-Swedish Red). Mr Prins said he would run these heifers in two separate production groups to enable

him to compare them 'on everything'.

This would help him decide whether to use the Red Dane to produce four-way crosses and whether to go back to the Holstein at any point. If he chose not to go back to the Holstein he would instead serve his F3 cows with Montbeliarde, 'as that's the next in the cycle'.

Although it was early days, Mr Prins said he was already leaning towards the Red Dane-sired four-way cross. "The results on the Red Dane are still somewhat unknown but we are confident," he said.

Mr Prins was keen to keep away from the Holstein 'for as long as possible' because he had experienced some quite severe health and reproduction problems before he started cross-breeding.

He said the herd had now turned around with cell counts down from 'pushing 300' to an average of to 140-160 with the handful of four-way crosses closer to 50.

Incidences of milk fever and ketosis were much lower with still-births reduced from 15 per cent to 5 and the death rate for milking cows from 10 per cent to 4.

This meant a better quality of life for him and the cows, he said: "Anytime you have health problems in the cows –

be it mastitis, a difficult calving, a dead calf, DAs, milk fever – that's not the fun part of the day. We've eliminated a lot of that."

Cows were also getting back in calf sooner. With an average 105 days open and a 49 per cent conception rate at first service the calving

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## Study 2 – Wes Bylsma

OF all the farmers that started cross-breeding with Mike Osmundson only one got cold feet and went back to the pure Holstein – Wes Bylsma.

But once the cross-bred females he had reared started entering the herd he quickly changed his mind again and is now a true convert.

"I got cold feet I guess," he said. "My vet was not really for it – in fact, he was against it – and I was told I was going to lose too much production.

"But as the following two years went by a lot of cross-breds came into the herd. I was seeing what they were doing and ever since that point I've kept on going – and I'm happy I've done it."

Mr Osmundson said it was not uncommon for Californian vets to be unsupportive of cross-breeding, as well as AI technicians and other farm-



Wes Bylsma in his new 25:25 parlour.

away. The distance is now not an issue, as Mr Bylsma is very pleased with all his cows, despite them being a wide range of different breeds.

This is because he started off crossing with Normade and some Brown Swiss while also buying in a selection of Jersey cross Holsteins. He found the Jerseys too small and the Normades not milky enough and so decided to copy his father and other Oakdale farmers – now all pure Holsteins remaining in the herd are served to the Montbeliarde, and the resulting cross put to the Swedish Red.

The biggest difference Mr Bylsma has seen is the increased number of replacement heifers coming through – a result of a fall in days open from 150 to 122, due to a fall in services to conception from 2.9 to 2.1.

Before he had been struggling to keep numbers up but is now milking 1,100 cows, the majority three times a day through a 25:25 parlour (manned for up to 20 hours a day) and the rest – a small group of sick and freshly calved cows – through a 10-point 'hospital' parlour. He employs 11 Mexican

members of staff to do this – seven to milk and four to manage the herd.

Mr Bylsma said he had switched between two and three times a day milking for many years, the original parlour coming under a great deal of pressure as numbers increased from the 400 cows he started out with 12 years ago. The new 25:25 parlour meant it was now possible, although another 50 cows would see the unit at full capacity.

Heifers leave the farm at five months and are reared to pregnancy by Mr Bylsma's father in Oakdale. Bull calves are sold at a day old, generating little income regardless of breeding.

As to the vet's promise that he would lose milk, Mr Bylsma said daily yields had fallen from 84 to 74lb with a slightly higher protein content.

"We've lost some milk but we've made up for that with better reproduction," he said. "On health and reproduction – we feel that's a lot better."

Mr Bylsma said he now had a lot less displaced abomasums, although he thought that was partly due to a change in management. The cull rate

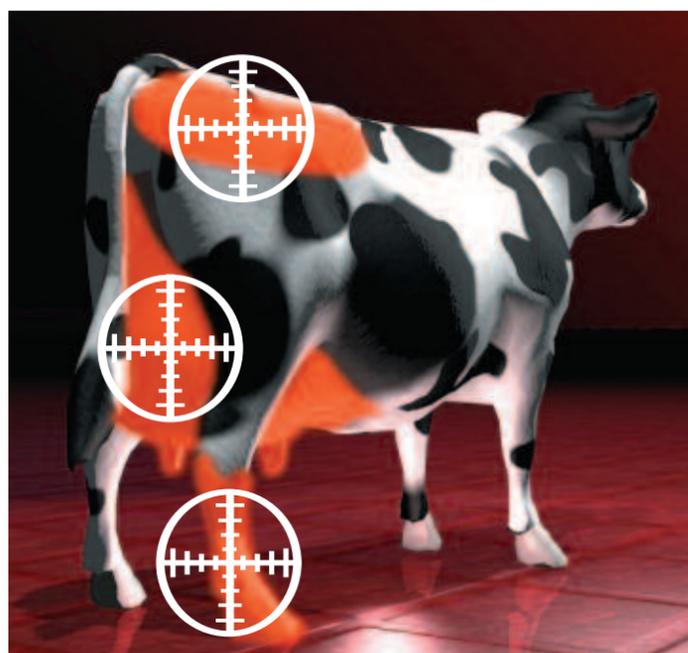
had fallen from 32 to 20 per cent, he said. Although he was giving all cows a lot of chances to get in calf, the Holsteins were still 'culling themselves' far more rapidly than the crosses.

"I try until the end but when she's only giving 30lb and still isn't in calf then she gets sold," said Mr Bylsma.

Despite his father repeatedly telling him he did not need hormone injections to get the cross-bred cows pregnant, Mr Bylsma said he was 'scared' to stop using them.

In comparison Willie Bylsma is entirely confident about the cross-bred cows, even making the decision to take on a second unit in Oakdale, stocked entirely with surplus replacements purchased from four different herds that had switched to cross-breeding. This unit is growing rapidly, having 672 cows a year ago and 1,300 now.

Some pure Holsteins were used to stock the farm initially but only 17 per cent still remain, in comparison to 64 per cent of Holstein cross Swedish Reds and 87 per cent Holstein cross Montbeliardes.



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