

THE MANAGER

TOP MANAGERS

By Chris Rossiter

At Fairmont Farm 'Drivers' create focus and hitch to results



Profile of a Top Producer

The owners of Fairmont Farm, East Montpelier, Vermont are especially good at pinpointing 'Drivers' that focus and propel owners and employees on missions to change and improve. These 'Drivers' are identified through first-hand experience and emerge from their vision for their farm, objective benchmarks and the bottom line. The farm owners through informal meetings share frustrations about what doesn't work well, discuss new ideas, follow what is happening elsewhere and consider their own resources. Formal sessions are scheduled for bigger issues like generational transfer. Along with a competitive spirit and motivation, the farm's people, many who are long time employees, remain engaged and the dairy moves ahead.

Fairmont Farm houses 800 cows at the home dairy in E. Montpelier, Vermont and 380 cows at the sister dairy in Craftsbury, 35 miles north. It took 15 years to add cows, combine three farms into one at home, add the sister dairy, and arrive at a final stable arrangement. The E. Montpelier and Craftsbury

dairies are separate enterprises that collaborate closely on everything, particularly cows, young stock, genetics, reproduction and breeding, crops management and decisions.

The passion to farm is a fundamental 'Driver' at Fairmont Farm. To start this story, the principle owners have engaged over the last decade in the process of transferring the farm to the next generation. Richard and Bonnie Hall, and Bonnie's nephew Tucker Purchase (current owners), recently completed purchase

of the home farm from original owners Donna and John Hall (Richard's parents), Richard's brother Stuart, and a third original partner Austin Cleaves (a two century farm neighbor to the home farm). Richard and Tucker's different personalities are complementary, which shapes new opportunities in ideas and management strengths. Bonnie keeps everyone grounded and accountable to the bottom line. Richard's parents and Austin are energetically involved and still employees but on their own schedules. The next generation is in the pipeline. All three Hall kids are fully involved in farm family meetings that encompass planning for the future of Fairmont. Ricky graduates from the Cornell University dairy science program in May 2012; Isabel is 11 and a star in the show ring; Clara graduated from Cornell University in 2010 and works for Yankee Farm Credit. The transfer process was not linear, and did not always go as planned, but everyone is proud that they have preserved the future for Fairmont farm and families.

Situated high above E. Montpelier in the heart of the Green Mountains and the North East Kingdom, Fairmont Farm itself is a 'Driver' that infuses vitality into the dairy, agriculture and local community. The farm hosts a spider-web of community and neighbor connections. Bonnie, Richard and Tucker recruit and inspire kids in the local 4H. They unreservedly coordinate and energize 4Hers and activities for the Orleans County Fair Dairy Show and Exhibit. The farm owners are known for getting things done, supporting ag in the community, being open to new ideas, having pride in dairying, exemplifying business integrity and liking good cows. These characteristics earn Fairmont Farm their upbeat, optimistic standing in the region.

Interviewing them about these meritorious traits, owners Richard Hall and Tucker Purchase did not wait long to interject and concede, "That's all nice, but on the NE Farm Business Summary we are



Three transformative changes at Fairmont Farm since 2008 included sand, stall and feed bunk fans and long day lighting.

FYI

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middle of the pack.” Tucker contemplated, “We do really well with the things people see. We aren’t as strong on some of the things behind the scenes.” He means some of the profitability measures. Bluntly, Richard added, “We are pretty leveraged, and we’ve had some years we weren’t very profitable.”

From this perspective emanates some of the other ‘Drivers’ that keep the people at Fairmont Farm focused and progressing. Annually they evaluate their vital stats against their peers in the Farm Credit Northeast Farm Business Summary Benchmarks Program. Tucker describes how they use their benchmark ranking, “We figure out where we are the most out of line. We assess how we have done in that area the past. We consider what is realistic for Vermont? What are our resources, what we can afford? We identify two to three areas per year.” Some of these evolve as new ‘Drivers’ or as revisions of existing ones. Richard and Tuckers’ competitive drive for Fairmont to rank in the top tier is clearly revealed in the benchmark discussion. Their competitive nature and vision fuel their own performance and translates into progressive leadership for the dairy.

A central Fairmont Farm ‘Driver’ in the last three years is purchased concentrate feed cost/cwt of milk produced. Richard admits, “I used to focus on milk per cow. We have made lots of milk at times but not very profitably. It took a while, but purchased concentrate feed cost per cwt finally became a real driver for me.”

This rally has spread to everyone on the farm; it is how they think. As a consequence, high forage diets are fed and high quality is paramount across the 1,300 acres of corn silage and 1,700 acres of haylage. Lowest diets are 63% forage with a 65% average across groups. At both farms they invest in more expensive corn seed with high digestibility for silage and shorter time to maturity to oblige the northern latitude. Half the corn silage at the main dairy is BMR. The shorter growing season and cool climate is too tough on BMR yield at the more northern Craftsbury farm.

At harvest, the focus is dry matter maturity and timing. It is a game of patience to get dry matter right field by field. “If it’s too wet we stop. When it is ready we go. We are always chopping. Everyone is geared up to dry matter. Lots of our employees have been with us for years, they understand what we need to do. We pack it well, inoculate and cover it. We manage the faces. We want to minimize dry matter loss and we hate waste. We use ‘Digi-Star.’ It gives me my purchased feed cost per cwt each day in a second. We try to keep it simple and track a few



The Hall Family at the E. Montpelier home farm, Ricky, Isabel, Clara, Richard and Bonnie are keen promoters of commercial dairying, and a love of good cows.

important things.”

On whole, their single-mindedness has yielded high digestibility corn silage and high quality haylage with consistently appropriate DM. Michael Tetreault is a dairy consultant for Poulin Grain and the nutritionist for the E. Montpelier dairy. “Fairmont Farm delivers the most consistent high quality forage that I’ve ever worked with. Even with the challenges of the 2011 crop year, they have still been successful at putting up above average quality forages. Production follows. RHA is 26,300. For 2011 they averaged 84 lbs of milk, 3.85 fat and 3.07 protein. They keep after what it takes.”

Richard and Tucker project that optimizing land base with high quality forages will be vital to the future economics of dairying in Vermont. “We are not going to grow a lot of grain here.”

A third transformative Fairmont Farm ‘Driver’ is optimized cows and their potential. This turning point came in 2008 with the end of rBST. By this time the farm was consolidated on the two dairies with stable cow numbers. “We thought about how we were going to counter the impact. We decided let’s put that money into cow comfort and make up for rBST.” This new spotlight thrust them into several transformative changes. Over two to three years they converted to all sand stalls. They installed fans that keep cows comfortable and milk production steady in the summer heat. Vermont’s few hot spells can still thwack production. Four rows of fans were mounted per group, with 3 ft fans over each row of beds and 4 ft fans over the feed bunk. Cows are cleaner and SCC averages 130,000. Claw horn disease (generically ‘abscesses’) is low, credited to comfortable stalls, high forage diets and 2.9 trims/cow/year. Long day lighting was in place on both farms in February 2012.

Mike Tetreault worked with the farm owners through several of their transitions. “Richard is open to new technology or a better way. If he engages in the idea, he has a high sense of urgency to get something done. He gets totally on it and moves.”

Here, another permanent Fairmont Farm ‘Driver’ surfaces, the “love of good cows.” Registered cows are the farm owners’ “hobby” and this enthusiasm is widely shared, including among the employees. Richard states “We have to keep it a hobby. But we are a different farm than 10 years ago, partly because of this attraction.” Growing and consolidating, they made a lot of milk at times, with low components. And they milked a lot of less desirable cows. “Now, we think about every cow like she is a favorite.

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Tucker Purchase, Fairmont owner, Herd Manager, and driver. Method and result focused, “Without a doubt our compliance is 100%.”

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Simply, we want to put each cow into the kind of place that a good cow should go.”

The appeal to milk “good looking cows” and optimize their potential pressed the farm to also take charge of herd reproduction. There was room in their CR and PR to improve breeding efficiency and production. They would choose their own bulls, use better semen, freeze some embryos and breed better calves. It was a difficult decision to part ways with their breeder of 30 years, but in 2006 Tucker took it all over. Thanks to high market cow prices they retired low performers. Presynch-Ovsynch 56 with tail chalking plus 21 day heat detection concentration enables both farms to sport a 26 to 29 percent pregnancy rate, 68% insemination risk, 39 to 42% conception rate, 66 days to first service and 166 average days in milk.

Tucker, who runs the Craftsbury farm and is general herd manager, and Will Hull, herdsman for the E. Montpelier location, have sole responsibility for all synchronizing and breedings. Tucker affirms “Our compliance is without a doubt 100%. Not a shot is missed.” He further elucidates that “The synch and chalking are ‘procedures.’ They get us to the barn.” Once there, he and Will take the time necessary to observe the cows, the whole environment and do the total job. Their success is also bred out of healthy competition and collaboration between them and the fact that they are both method and result- focused.

The most recent byproduct of the ‘Driver’ to optimize cow potential is the switch to group calf housing and free access acidified milk feeding. Over the last five years, genetics, reproduction and healthy calves raised in 110 hutches yielded an average 4% internal growth rate, after dairy sales of approximately 30 cows per year, and some occasional heifers. Motivated by labor efficiency and the desire to capture aggressive early calf growth, plus first lactation milk

potential, they finished a new calf barn in November 2011. Payback will be relatively quick with the labor savings and good milk prices. However, the chief concern for the barn itself was how to provide good quality air at calf-level. Air quality and respiratory health in calf barns generally fails, particularly compared to general success in hutch environments. They settled on a novel ventilation system, designed by Curt Gooch, Cornell PRO-DAIRY. Tempered fresh air is delivered through forced air ducts in the sidewalls and exits through a central floor exhaust plenum.

Richard was open to a different strategy to get good air quality. “We spent more money, but the design seemed to have a good chance of working, so we finally went for it.” Recent ADG to 56 days was 2 lbs per day and met the first goal. A long-time employee George Allen recently took over responsibility for calves and is still on the learning curve to figure out the new routines. George is an indispensable employee who is steeped in cow experience. So, George was awarded the challenge to make this new system work. “So far, it’s pretty great. It is a different set of skills with calves in groups. But the calves and their antics are lots of fun.”

‘Drivers’ are instrumental to Fairmont Farm’s successes. Queried about the disadvantages and advantages of dairy farming in the North East Kingdom, Vermont, Tucker fired without hesitation, “There are no cropping advantages. It is where we want to be. Family is here, all the important things.” Richard injected, “The market is here, they say.” In the future they foresee it will be about optimal use of land base, and “genomics”! For this minute, the ‘Drivers’ for Fairmont Farm are aimed at balancing good production, making it at a reasonable cost and milking “good looking” cows.