

Star Farmer Todd Miller Will Compete For National Award In Kansas City

BY ROBIN PHILLIPS

Berks County Correspondent
HAMBURG — Todd Miller, the 21-year-old son of Ernest and Joyce Miller, R1 Hamburg, will be attending the National FFA Convention in Kansas City next week.

Miller, one of 735 American Farmers in the United States, has earned the title of Eastern Regional Star Farmer and will compete with three other regional winners for the title of Star Farmer of America.

National, state and local FFA officials select the stars on the basis of production agriculture management, the return on investments from their enterprises, and the growth of their programs from the time of enrollment in vocational agriculture. FFA members are also judged on their leadership in FFA extra curricular activities.

"He's going to be competitive," says Miller's FFA advisor Lynn VanTassel of Hamburg Area School District. "He's the primary crops management person there (at his home farm)."

The skills that earned Miller the honor to be among these elite FFA members come from experiences on the farm, which include, feeding a 22-cow dairy herd, reducing calf mortality and managing 703 acres of crops.

As a one-third partner in his parent's "Mil-Joy" Farm between Hamburg and Virginville, Berks County, Miller shares duties with his mother, who does much of the milking, and his brother, Scott, who is herdsman.

This year, Todd has complete control of feeding calves, managing the alfalfa and corn acreage and maintaining the machinery.

For over half his life, Todd has

been feeding an average of 20 calves a day. As a 12-year-old, Todd fed calves in an old chicken house on the farm. Three years ago, after a solid FFA education and "the chance to get out and see what was working for others," Miller relates, they converted to outside, individual calf hutches.

"I learned the hard way," Miller says of his calf raising abilities. He continues, "With the experience of feeding them for a while and just knowing what to do with a calf when it gets sick," helped this ambitious farmer reduce calf deaths.

Today, Miller calves are raised in individual hutches placed side by side on a forward slanted stone pack. Fencing along the front and back of the hutches ties them together and allows the calf freedom to roam about. A plywood panel prohibits any contact between calves.

Hutches are bedded with sawdust. The hutch system also includes cement slabs that Miller obtained from old sidewalks and placed in front of each hutch. The cement slabs keep mud and manure from the front of the hutch and are cleaned when it rains.

Calves are fed colostrum from the bottle and then trained for bucket feeding. "When it's nice, we'd rather have our cows calve outside," Miller explains. The calves are then brought to the hutches and fed colostrum.

"The sooner you get them off milk, the more feed they eat," Miller notes. Calves are weaned at six to eight weeks, wormed before they are moved to group pens and then twice yearly after that. Miller also helped develop the feeding and cropping systems on the farm. The dairy herd is divided into five groups: dry cows, low group, medium group and a high production group. The high producers are further divided into a "just fresh group," kept in a

loose-housing manure pack barn, and all others housed in a spacious free-stall setup with concrete feed areas.

The herd is fed a total mixed ration including haylage, corn silage, high moisture ear corn, roasted soybeans, soybean meal and oats. Todd was instrumental in converting the dairy herd to haylage instead of baled hay.

"I was doing the feeding and our haylage was testing 2 percent higher (19 percent) than the baled hay, and we were killing ourselves baling the hay," he explained.

So, for the last two years, they have baled hay only as a last resort and have depended on haylage and silage. "It's just too many acres to run across to bale," Miller said. With haylage, he said, they get four to five quality cuttings.

Miller cuts alfalfa "as soon as you see little purple buds here and there."

"We can average 60 acres a day," putting away haylage, he notes. "There's no way we could bale that much. It is a really fast system." In addition to the added protein (in the haylage), "labor was a big consideration," he said.

The Millers store everything in trench silos, another labor and cost conscious management decision. They can fill two trenches at a time with loader tractors and skid loaders.

"We can make better quality...put it in a bit greener and save on labor and maintenance costs," Miller says.

Because of increased cuttings, the Millers fertilize the fields heavily. Miller, who works with a feed consultant on the feeds he uses, says the fields are holding up well.

The Miller herd average is increasing after a change in feed companies and currently stands at

17,300 pounds milk with a 3.6 percent butterfat on 228 cows. Cows are milked in a double-six herringbone parlor.

Free time out of the fields finds Miller in the shop going over equipment to reduce down time when the harvesting must be done.

"I like working in the shop. I don't like downtime in the field. We do all our own shop work here and go over the equipment pretty thoroughly," Miller said.

Todd has attended previous FFA conventions and was a member of the 1982 winning dairy judging team that went on to place third in the nation. Todd was the third place individual. He was also active on winning teams in 4-H competitions.

Miller received a gold medal in dairy showmanship in Kansas City in 1983 and has always had the ambition and skill to be a success.

Miller's mother, Joyce, a 4-H leader, said she would like to see her youngest of four children receive the top award at next week's convention.

As for Todd, he credits his parents for always being there with the encouragement, advice and experience he needed. "FFA is definitely worth all the time," Miller says.

With future goals of doing an even better job at home and increasing the herd average through better feeding, he credits FFA with an education outside the classroom. FFA also provided him with an opportunity to travel and to meet other people with the same problems and different ways of doing things. The experience, this young farmer says, has been invaluable.

On the eve of his trip to Kansas City, Miller says: "It's something. I never thought I'd get this far."

FFA advisor VanTassel is obviously proud of his student. "It's saying something about the calibre of farming here in Berks County.

The Miller family won't be the only ones cheering Todd on; all of Pennsylvania will know he is a Star Farmer.

American Food Basket

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marketing common snails as escargots. A Frenchman in Dripping Springs, Texas, is trying to cultivate truffles. Bok choy and other Chinese vegetables are grown in New Jersey. A University of Minnesota professor and others are working on commercially cultivating Japanese shiitake mushrooms; the Shiitake Growers Association of Wisconsin was formed last year with 96 members.

With tortillas, tofu, snow peas, and radicchio on supermarket shelves, what's next? Ms. Schneider writes that carambola

— starfruit — "may become the most important 'new' fruit since the kiwi."

Another coming thing is a variety of mushrooms, Cohen says, and Frieda's Finest has its eye on the hon shimeji mushroom. "We get it from Japan," Judi Greening says, "but New Zealand melons, passion fruit, and kiwi are all being grown in California now, so..."

So someday, American-grown hon shimeji mushrooms may be served with that all-American dinner along with the steak and ice cream.

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