

Bicksler Farm: One In 5 Million

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WINTERSVILLE (Berks Co.)
— Berks County dairyman Ray Bicksler is almost as likely to hit the lottery than have a cow give birth to five live heifer calves in less than two years.

The odds of hitting seven numbers in the Pennsylvania Super 7 lottery are one in 9.6 million—the odds of Bicksler having a cow give birth to twins, and then triplets are one in 5 million.

But not only does Bicksler have five living heifer calves born to him in 370 days from one cow, he has a healthy herd of registered Holsteins in which to add these new ones.

The calves and triplets are more of a freak of nature than something worthy of scientific research, according to a Penn State professor.

He also said that some dairymen might be upset with the result because of the stress that having twins and triplets can put on a cow. Often reduced milk production can occur because of a lack of needed body fat and tissue. There's also an increased risk to the cow, during and after delivery. Infection is more likely.

However, Bicksler said he is happy with the twist of nature.

On July 30, before Bicksler left his farm for a day of helping to show Holsteins at the Lebanon Area Fair, one of his cows, 9-year-old Russelldale Ford Glitter, gave birth to triplets—all heifer calves. All three were on their feet and drinking colostrum within the hour.

At a week old, the triplets were small, but Bicksler, renowned for his line of registered Holsteins, is

going to keep them for his milking herd, which averages near 60 cows.

"I want to keep them together to see how they do under the same environmental conditions," he said.

Bicksler said the triplets should give him some indication of what effect the genetic selection of the sire has on triplets.

The triplet calves are not identical, but fraternal. Two are very close in conformation and markings. One has distinctly different markings and is slightly larger and more active than the others.

The twins are also fraternal and should be getting ready to join the milking herd in another year or so. He said they are probably not going to be bred until 18 months.

"I've heard of twins," said Larry Specht, professor of dairy science at Penn State.

"I only know of one set of identical triplets. Fraternal triplets are a little more common. I think this is the third set of triplets this year (nationwide)," Specht said.

Fertility drugs can induce twins or triplets, but such is not the case with the Bicksler cow offspring—they were natural.

"Many farmers don't look at triplets as a blessing," Specht said. "It can cause severe strain on the mother. They can arrive early and many times the placenta is retained, can cause health problems."

However, Glitter is faring well, and her offspring are apparently equally healthy. She is eligible for her third E rating soon.

The sires of the twins and triplets are different. Huberview Bell Promise sired the twins. Apple Notch Jack Daniels is the sire of

the triplets.

For the last 10 years, all of Bicksler's breeding has been done by a neighbor, Randy Moyer.

Bicksler's good luck and fortune extends beyond having a cow that produces heifer calves prolifically. His dairy operation is recognized for the high-indexing quality of its cows and heifers and also for the quality of the bulls he produces and sells to artificial insemination cooperatives.

His farm, Russelldale, is located along the western edge of Berks County, just north of the limestone belt. His father, for whom the farm is named, never saw Ray's 100-acre spread. While growing up, Ray's father had a farm in northern Lebanon County and then another near Russelldale, but closer to the thick topsoil and limestone belt that run through the Lebanon Valley.

"We used to get on dad about buying the second place, but he made more money in four years there than he did in the 10 years he spent on the first farm," Bicksler said.

When Bicksler started farming on his own, it was part time. He worked full time for a manufacturing firm in Cleona and started with a high producing grade cow. Later, he bought all registered animals. When his original cow died, he was left with an all registered herd.

He started milking in 1968 and had a little more than five cows when he first went on test. Though the milk production was small, he sold it in small quantities to Hershey Foods, which used to have a small collection point in Myerstown.

He and his wife lived on the farm of Oberholtz Church and in

addition to his sexton duties and fulltime job, his herd had grown to 20 milking cows. In 1974, he had to make a choice to either go full-time milking or fulltime working in industry.

He said sometimes he thinks he made a mistake. But for most of the time he said he is very happy he decided to go into milk production and breeding.

"With farming, you might not have money in your pocket, but you hope that you have something when you decide to call it quits," he said.

The Bicksler herd contains seven homegrown Excellent cows and has been closed for the last 10 years.

"If you breed your own, I feel you accomplished something," he said.

The evidence that he is correct, at least for himself, is the fact that his best bull produced yet has become fairly popular with Atlantic Breeders Cooperative. That bull is Russelldale Promise.

Bicksler recommends that those starting off in dairy business

purchase "One. A good one—out of a good cow family and buy a good commercial herd and work off that."

He also said the new farmer should go on test immediately and buy only animals that are on test. In his own case, all the animals he bought were registered, but not on test. He said he basically had to start from scratch to add production information to the pedigree.

It has paid off with a large number of sales of embryos and bulls, in addition to milk.

But most of all, Bicksler said he is lucky to be in farming. And if the odds keep going his way—such as triplets—he expects to be farming for some time.

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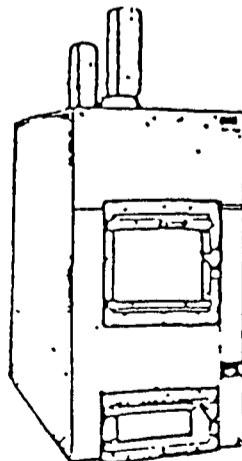
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