

Solid Gold Decisions Are Well Considered

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EMLENTON (Clarion Co.) — Attendants to the 1993 and 1994 Pa. Holstein Association fall championship shows held in Harrisburg should remember seeing Mike and Cindy Weimer at the halter of their 6-year-old, Excellent 94-point, Solid Gold Rotate Easter cow.

The cow was named the total performance winner two years running and the Weimers had their family picture taken with the cow. In the Large Arena of the state Farm Show Complex in Harrisburg, the Weimer family stood together, smiling broadly, with their cow in front of the All-American banner, with photographers' cameras clicking and flashes popping lights.

Easter may have a chance of winning the award three times if she calves well when due in May, and stays healthy and produces well, according to Mike. The total performance award recognizes both dairy production and animal configurations.

The Weimers farm about 250 acres of rolling hills near Emlenton in the western tip of Clarion County, near busy I-80, the interstate highway that cuts an east-to-west slash across the middle of the county. The farm name is Solid Gold.

The farm's herd consists of about 76 milking cows and the most recent rolling herd average showed average 305-day production of 25,911 pounds of milk, 943 pounds fat, and 826 pounds of protein.

The Solid Gold herd is treated like many other top-producing herds — the cows are fed a totally mixed, balanced ration, the milking herd is kept in a free-stall setup with clay-based stall beds topped with wood shavings.

Calves are kept separate, heifers are grouped, dry cows have their own program, consultants are used, and concern for the breeding program is given high priority.

But they, like many others with family farms, are not strictly "full-time" farmers.

Cindy works as a communications specialist for Mid East United Dairy Industry Association and also keeps the farm's records and keeps all the breed registry paperwork. Mike said she works very hard on the farm and with her job, and has their two children also; Sarah, 5, and Spencer, 3.

Mike, 37, also works off the farm, auctioneering, and currently he is kept busy doing most of the selection for the state Holstein Association commission sale.

But in the meantime, the farm is a full-time operation, and has to be kept going and managed, and the cows have to get milked three times per day.

Up until a month ago, Mike had only employed one man as his herdsman. He hired a second full-time worker for the farm because of his sale-selection responsibilities.

"I'm going to be gone at least 20 days this month, and (20) the next, so I have to have this kind of labor to keep this going."

The Weimers are family farmers, and they share the decisions and choices that many one-family farms are being forced to make, especially in recent years with the changes in the dairy industry, and international trade.

Mike said that for him, the choices that many were taking, or seemed to consider, were not

necessarily appealing to him.

So he said he began searching for information he needed.

About two to three years ago, Mike said he started making changes at the farm. He attended dairy day meetings and read articles on what others are doing in the industry.

He has a college degree, works in the industry and visits a lot of farmers, so he had the opportunity to see what others were doing, and all interests in the dairy industry seemed to be repeating the same message: get bigger or die.

Mike said he doesn't agree that dairying has to be a job for a full-time owner/operator, to the exclusion of other vocations. And he isn't alone. Many see farming as a main revenue source to help pay for the land, but continue to work off-farm to provide for more cash flow and living requirements.

Either way, each farm operation is as different as the owner and operator, and while some management considerations may be the same across the board, each individual has to decide how farming can be successful for him.

For Mike, it was a matter of figuring out a way of incorporating his love of dairying with his other, related vocational abilities and assets.

He said that if he were to expand his milk-production to the size required by some economic equations for return on investment, he would probably have to give up doing off-farm work; that is, if a bank would loan the amount needed to do a large expansion.

At the time he was considering changes, he was milking about 50 cows. He then had a herd dispersal and sold almost all of the herd, except for a couple of older cows and some heifers.

He reinvested money into remodeling a barn and adding freestalls.

Shortly after going to 70 cows in 1993, he talked with a county extension agent, who helped him work out financial projections, and it seemed that milking three-times per day would work well to boost cash flow. And it has, Mike said.

But in the meantime, there were still some things missing in controlling the business, he said.

Soon after expanding the herd, Mike said he did attend a dairy expansion seminar, primarily, he said, "Just to keep open minded about it."

Then he heard about the Dairy MAP (Management and Profitability) program, he said, and attended the basic course.

Weimer couldn't find what he needed, he said, until he attended the first Dairy-MAP program.

The combination of the workshop speakers and the discussions with peers and homework appealed to Weimer, he said, because it allowed him to see that he could be the type of farmer he wanted to be; not like someone down the valley, or in another state, but Mike Weimer.

He and Cindy put together a mission statement for the first time; he started using his DHIA records for herd management of health and reproduction and dairy production; he started monthly meetings with his herdsman; ...

"A lot of things they bring up (at Dairy MAP workshops), you know that you should have been doing them," Weimer said. "I went to college, and several of the guys (also at the workshop) went to college and several things you knew (already). But the program helped



Mike and Cindy Weimer, with children Sarah, and Spencer, stand at the halter of their 6-year-old, Excellent 94-point, Solid Gold Rotate Easter cow, after she was named the total performance winner at the 1993 Pa. Holstein Association fall championship show.

trigger (me) to do it."

For example, sitting down with the herdsman on a regular basis was not something he was used to doing.

"There's so many routine things during the day (farming), that it takes effort to stop and have a meeting," he said. But now he does it.

"I now take time and get information from everyone involved in the farm, when making a high percentage of decisions. I have one exceptionally good herdsman, and I sit down with him once in a while and go over ideas, and do problem solving."

"I did start using the (DHIA) records more after MAP," Mike said. "Primarily, I used it before for merchandising."

The Weimers have been involved with merchandising cattle and include that as an aspect of the family business that also requires management.

Mike has been involved with judging cattle since growing up on a family farm in Emmitsburg, Md. When in college at the University of Maryland, he was on the cattle judging team in college and went to Madison, Wis., for the national contest, his team finishing a respectable fourth.

This past year, the Weimers have sent five bulls to stud. Mike regularly sells embryos to buyers in France and Holland.

This year, one of the cows he bred and developed he sold for \$23,000 to Golden Oaks Farm, in Illinois, during the Genetic Advantage Sale, held in New York. At this year's Eastern National Holstein Sale, he sold a 93-point Mark daughter for \$6,900.

These things didn't just happen. These things were hoped for, planned for, and worked for.

Mike said he uses a dairy management program, but prior to attending Dairy MAP, he didn't really update the program with DHIA-created data.

Now he does.

"I didn't used to keep them updated, but now I do," Mike said. "It's easier (now) for my vet to go over. We have a cow search through Holstein Association we were primarily using it for management, but it's easier for me to go through my DHIA records, so we keep both of those up-to-date now."

His DHIA technician is part of the team. His hired men are part of the team, his veterinarian, etc. Altogether, they are creating the entity known as Solid Gold Farm.

This past year, he and his herdsman attended a second, advanced workshop offered through the Dairy MAP program. This program was on feeds and nutrition.

On Tuesday, he said he was going to hold a meeting with his herdsman and new employee to figure out a realignment of responsibilities. Mike hired someone to fill in for a milking, so the three could have time to talk and work out a strategy.

"We're going to go over responsibilities. I have a list of notes I made up last night. I want to have monthly meetings, get copies of somatic cell reports so we can talk about problem cows, talk about things we think need done."

"I'm asking that the three of us are going to come up with a one-year goal, a five-year goal, and that would be for things with the herd and things with the crops."

The Dairy MAP program was not a magic formula for success nor a panacea for farm economic health, according to Weimer, but

he said it made him realize what he had to do to get better control of his direction.

"In no way did I use everything (learned about management) I should have, but everything I've used has been good."

"I guess (my) main goal is to get better, not bigger. When into this merchandising, there is a lot of opportunity, if you can do a good job with the herd."

Editor's Note: Every year several hundred Pennsylvania dairy farms go out of business. Changing times make incorporating sound management technologies important for the efficiency and profitability of dairy farm businesses.

In an effort to respond to the need for up-to-date business management information, many dairy industry officials and organizations have turned to Penn State's Dairy-MAP program as one way to help stabilize and reverse the downward trend of the dairy industry in Pennsylvania.

This is the last of three farm interviews with family members who have participated in one of the Dairy-MAP seminars held across the state last year.

Cull For Improvement

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Fewer losses from reproductive and other health problems would permit more animals to be removed for low production, thus

Cows Removed from PaDHIA Herds 1993-94 Test Year

