

Making All the Right Moves: Ath-Mor Holsteins

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LEE, N.H. — Russ Atherton and Tom Morrell go way back. Their partnership started about 21 years ago when they worked as farm hands for a dairy producer in Lee, N.H. After working together for about eight years, they decided to buy out their boss and start farming together.

Now, 13 years after becoming partners and starting Ath-Mor Holsteins, they are a force to be reckoned with. Russ and Tom breed world-class registered Holstein cows, who are making 90 pounds of milk a day (and an impressive 6.7 lbs a day of milk solids) on three-times-a-day milking and no rbST. How do they do it?

“We’ve been lucky to have been so successful,” says Russ. “I really feel that if we take care of the cows, they’ll take care of us.” Luck, says Ath-Mor nutritionist Tom Hickley, has nothing to do with it. “These guys

have been successful for a long time, and there’s a reason for it. They are extremely consistent, tuned-in, and focused”. Specifically, Russ and Tom are cow people. They spend about 90 percent of their time working with the cows, so they are very tuned-in to the needs and performance of their herd. Importantly, they are very consistent with animal husbandry protocols. They have very specific approaches as to when, how, and who carries out which animal protocols.

On average, they milk about 155-160 cows (average days in milk is 170). The cows are housed in a free-stall setting with really high quality sand bedding that doesn’t pack. Ath-Mor purchases this coarse sand from a local source and they deeply bed each stall to maximize cow



Photo courtesy of the University of Vermont

A Holstein at Ath-Mor Holsteins in Lee, New Hampshire.

comfort. Cows are milked in a double-six milking parlor, with an average somatic cell count is less than 150,000. Young stock are raised in calf hutches and then moved to freestall group housing before joining the milking string. During rough times and low milk prices, Russ and Tom have had great success selling breeding stock. They flush their best cows, and sell bulls to AI companies.

Russ and Tom grow all their own haylage, have it custom chopped, and they buy all their corn silage. As with any dairy farm, the quality of their forage is constantly changing. To deal with this, Hickley implements feed additives such as yeast culture as a buffer, and FloMatrix, which does an excellent job of minimizing the impact of fluctuations in forage quality. When Hickley makes a nutritional recommendation, Tom

and Russ do not hesitate even if the price tag is high. They never question costs associated with the ration, but are interested in the potential effectiveness of a given product, and they are open to anything. Once a product is implemented, they evaluate the effectiveness over time.

Another critical key to their success is focus. Russ and Tom know what they can do, and what they can't. They focus on doing what they're good at, and don't worry about the other stuff. Because they have a small land base and not a lot of room to grow, they prioritize issues such as cow health, and milk production, and efficiency. Clearly, this has served them well. Their cows continue to produce a lot of milk, maintain excellent health, and other dairy producers look to them for secrets to success.