

# Pacesetter Shares a Little About Their Success

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At the age of nine, Shawn Wagner began his farming career as the man responsible for washing the animal waterers. Now, with 21 years of farming experience under his belt, Shawn is the Crop Manager and Mechanic at Wagner Farms, Inc., his family's fifth generation dairy farm near Gillett, WI.

Wagner Farms is a 650 head dairy farm nestled in the northeast corner of Shawano County, approximately 35 miles northwest of Green Bay. Shawn, along with his parents, Hank and Pam Wagner, and his sister and brother-in-law, Laura and Tyler Raatz, work side-by-side with their eight full-time employees. Together, they ensure the family's Holsteins are healthy and comfortable, the 1,050 acres of owned and rented ground is producing high quality forages, and the farm is efficient and profitable. Milking three times a day in a double 16 parlor and the hard work and attention the family pays to all aspects of the farm, from the cows to the employees, has resulted in a daily per cow production average of 104 lbs of milk. The successful operation has grown to include the three families as co-owners and operators.



Left to Right: Shawn, Jackson, & Crystal Wagner; Judy & Tony Wagner; Hank & Pam Wagner; Tyler & Laura Raatz.

Shawn, Shawano County's 2015 Pacesetter Award winner, took over the cropping responsibilities from his grandfather, Tony Wagner, a Shawano County Forage Council founding member. Shawn attributes his love of machinery, equipment, and crops to Grandpa Tony. "Grandpa is very active in 4-H. As a kid, I really enjoyed helping him with the 4-H crops contest, receiving, organizing, and judging grain and forage samples from the county. That experience, along with watching him make crop management decisions for the farm, sparked my love of agronomy." Growing up in a family that loves cows, Shawn was highly involved in the animal part of the dairy, but it was not his true calling. "After attending a short course at UW-Madison, I interned with Wayside Dairy in the maternity ward. I really enjoyed working with the cows and calves, but my true passion was spending 18 hours a day in a tractor."



Shawn's philosophy to cropping the farm's coarse soils, ranging from loam to fine sand textures, is to use technology to make profitable decisions. Working with his custom operator and the farm's dairy nutrition and agronomy consultants, Shawn monitors field yield maps and forage laboratory analyses to time cuttings, monitor crop status, and to determine when alfalfa fields are taken out of production. In an area where winter can last seven months of the year, rains can be sparse, and soils are droughty, Shawn cites, "Weather is our biggest challenge. On average, alfalfa fields are rotated out every three or four years. However, winterkill always comes into play."

Shawn oversees 320 acres of alfalfa, 500 acres of corn silage, and 230 acres of high-moisture corn each year. Wagners' fields are a little larger than some in the area, with the largest field totaling 80 acres and the

smallest, 11 acres. Fields rotating into alfalfa are deep tilled in the fall and field cultivated twice in the spring, with the last pass incorporating a roller. The alfalfa is direct seeded at 16 lbs of pure live seed per acre and then rolled. Shawn plants Roundup Ready alfalfa with no additional interseeded crop, as the dairy ration is fine tuned for pure, high quality alfalfa. Shawn tests his soils every four years and alfalfa receives dairy wash water after the first and second harvests. Additional macronutrients are added when needed. Alfalfa fields are typically sprayed annually with a herbicide, a plant growth regulator, and micronutrients. Insecticides are used when economically justified.



Alfalfa is harvested as haylage and stored in bunkers. First crop is monitored using scissor clips and harvest is initiated when the crop reaches 190 RFQ. Shawn takes 4-5 cuttings/year, typically on a 28-day cutting schedule. This year, however, with an early first cut, Shawn shortened the harvest schedule to every 26 days to hopefully get a fifth crop in mid- to late-September, if Mother Nature plays along. This due diligence pays off, as Shawn's alfalfa fields yield ~5 tons/ac annually, approximately a ton of dry matter above the area's average.

Shawn likes to no-till corn into his terminated alfalfa sod, as the reduced tillage not only saves on input costs, but also helps to maintain soil organic matter and provides adequate residue for erosion control and moisture management. Corn silage yields typically average 25 tons/ac, with some fields yielding more than 31 tons/ac last year. Much like the haylage, silage is stored in concrete walled bunkers.

In addition to his family, Shawn has been influenced by many positive role models in the crops and dairy industry. "I remember Gordie Jones, a veterinarian and dairy consultant, challenging my family to begin planning our operation as if we had 1,000 animals when we only had 150 cows. That foresight helped set the farm up for success and is why we are where we are at today." Shawn's love for crops was also fostered by Jeff Simon, a local agronomist, and Joe Stellato, the former UW-Extension Ag Agent, coming to the farm to help with crop management decisions. "I always want to work with innovative people willing to try new technologies and new ways of doing things. I am lucky to have had those people in my life." Staying involved with those in the industry is important. Both Shawn and his Grandpa Tony are members of the Shawano County Forage Council and the Midwest Forage Association.

Without a doubt, farming is in the Wagner blood. The sixth generation, Shawn and his wife Crystal's one-year-old son Jackson, is gearing up to take over the farm one day. If he follows in his great-grandfather Tony's and dad's footsteps, he'll be scouting corn and fixing tractors before you know it!

