Getting Better, Not Bigger is this Dairy Farmer's Goal

Fae Holin, Midwest Forage Association

Adam Faust isn't looking to expand his 70-cow dairy; he's instead honing his operation to produce the best-quality feed for the highest milk production possible. "I'm looking at ways to get better at this size," says the Chilton, WI, dairy farmer.

In 2015, the 38-year-old took over Faustone Holstein Farm from his parents, Paul & Judy, after a 15-year partnership. Besides managing his registered Holsteins, Faust also grows corn, soybeans, oats, and alfalfa on 500 owned and rented acres. Although born with spina bifida causing mobility challenges all his life, as well as losing a leg in 2013 (he now wears a prosthesis), Faust hasn't let those physical limitations slow him down.

"Over time, I figured I should work a bit smarter instead of just wrecking my body," he says. "So we're working smarter, not harder" – and making use of many innovative technologies.

L to R: Adam Faust, his father and mother Paul and Judy Faust, and sisters Sara and Erin Faust.

Those include a DeLaval Carrier Rail Milking System in his newly renovated tie-stall barn along with a DelPro Herd Management system. The electronic milking system, more common in Canada and Europe, Faust says, is on tracks and pipes milk out, reducing heavy lifting among other benefits. The herd management system keeps track of each cow's milk production and electronically provides required DHI information after each milking.

For bedding, Faust makes use of recycled paper from a nearby recycling plant. It looks a bit like sand but isn't as hard on the equipment. At least 5" of the product are spread in each bedding stall by a remodeled sand shooter loaded on a skid steer and driven through the barn. "The cows love the bedding; they're very comfortable," he says.

Because he also custom harvests, Faust has harvesting equipment large enough to quickly and efficiently put up his forage rations – alfalfa haylage and corn silage – at peak quality. The Harvestore his family built in 1998 for high-moisture corn was recently renovated for haylage storage and an unloader was purchased to transport feed quickly from storage to the herd.

"We were just never happy with the consistency of the high-moisture corn," explains Faust, who now feeds 75% corn silage and 25% alfalfa haylage in a 70% forage and 30% grain ration. "It's so much more consistent to go to a dry grain mix, and we don't have to worry about mold and toxins."

His cows' rolling herd average is 28,000 lbs. Providing his herd with a consistent feed is Faust's major goal. He currently grows 60 acres of hybrid alfalfa and about 40 acres of corn silage; the rest is planted to corn for grain and soybeans. Oats are planted on whatever acreage he plans to fall-seed into alfalfa.

"I take the oats off, get my manure hauled early, and then no-till alfalfa into it (at 20 lbs/ac). That's so the next year I have a production year instead of having to deal with new seedings." The feed from new stands is never as consistent as the haylage from full-production fields, Faust says. He rotates his alfalfa every three years to maintain a consistent feed.

This fall, Faust will use yet another new technology and seed about 25 acres to a reduced-lignin alfalfa that has shown to offer increased harvest flexibility and digestibility. He'll stay with his usual five cuttings and aim for improved digestibility.

He cuts alfalfa on a 25-day schedule and starts early. "This spring I think we were the first ones to cut around here. For some reason, it seems to work out; we hit the harvest windows a little bit better." Yields average 6-7 tons/ac.

Since it's mainly put up as haylage, the alfalfa is cut with an 18' sickle mower and lightly conditioned in heavy first cuttings. "By the time we get to later crops, we'll back the pressure off the chopper rollers," he says. The crop is not merged to prevent added ash content. "With alfalfa haylage, we're shooting for the stars on quality," Faust says.

Silage corn is also harvested for optimum quality. "We cut as high as the equipment will go; I'll leave the bottom of the plant, which is less digestible, in the field. We're averaging 20-25 tons/yr of corn silage even cutting as high as possible." He estimates he leaves 26" of stubble in fields and hopes to tinker with his chopper this fall to increase cutting height even more. Faust quotes a neighbor and mentor, Tom Kestell of Ever-Green-View, who has told him, "The higher you cut the corn, the more milk you make."

"I don't believe in storing low-quality feed," Faust adds. "I'm always looking at forage storage as how many pounds of milk can I store instead of how many pounds of feed can I store."

In addition to his experience in growing up on a farm and being mentored, Faust added to his agricultural education by attending the University of Wisconsin Farm and Industry Short Course. He has been on the Calumet County Forage Council for 18 years and has been a member of the Midwest Forage Association since it was established in 2004. "I really enjoy attending Symposium every year and always learn something new," he says.