

Learning aAa in The Netherlands:

Marcel Verboom asked me to write down my honest thoughts of analysis when I arrived back in New Zealand.

I knew my life had changed the moment I started Phillip Hasheider's book. There are many situations where history hangs in the balance. For me it was a chance encounter with this book that I was not even looking for. It just found me. It's not a book that many stumble into in New Zealand and I didn't have to read it but something made me. Whatever it was it lead me down a path I never imagined to the opposite side of the world. I am naturally shy, not worldly, not well travelled, not overly ambitious or even adventurous so everything I have done in the past couple of weeks is completely out of my comfort zone. At no point in my preparations did I feel any fear; all I carried in my heart was a love of cows.

It took some time for me to digest the working conditions of a Dutch farm. The dairy parlours, housed cows, feed rations and young stock facilities were completely different to what I was accustomed to and this took some adjusting. There were many places that we went to in the first few days that really irritated me. Some of the conditions were so bad for animals that I think in New Zealand the SPCA and animal rights activists would have them shut down. There are many lessons in seeing this. First, it is reality. I saw real dutch farms. Many New Zealand pedigree breeders travel abroad and they get taken on specifically hand picked tours and see some of the best cattle and facilities abroad. It is no wonder that many generate a romanticized impression of overseas dairying and genetics.

Prior to my trip, I was completely indifferent when it came to large-scale fully housed dairy operations in New Zealand. Now I hope that they understand what they are doing because housed cows are a lot more sensitive to their environment and handling than cows kept outdoors. Not to mention the expense of it. Expenses are definitive on any dairy farm in the world and as we face the reality of \$4.70 payouts it just seems like a surefire way for more NZ dairy land to end up in Chinese ownership.

One of the saddest things about Holland is the fact that there are many more people that want to be a dairy farmer than there is affordable land available for farming. The landmass is so small and the land so expensive that the reality of owning land without family succession planning is almost impossible. This is also an advantage for the Dutch dairy industry because it helps keep the size of the farms small. When a farm and herd is smaller it is easier to achieve maximum efficiencies than larger operations. This could change quite drastically with the end of the quota system in 2015.

With that in mind the cost of land and the amount of leverage in dairy farming in New Zealand is a huge problem for future farming generations. If farmland becomes so expensive that ownership is unachievable without family succession planning, then we will constantly be facing skilled labour shortages and threats from overseas purchasers consuming prime land. Because the size of farms is so much bigger in New Zealand the level of skill required to best utilize the land and

resources, while containing expenditure has to be a lot higher. Therefore if that is not present we face some major challenges in the future. Dairy production worldwide is becoming more competitive and the increasing presence of food speculators in major markets will put a lot of pressure on grass roots commercial farming. Whether you farm 80 cows in Holland or 800 in Canterbury you must be prepared for that.

So what role does Triple A have on below average dairy farming operations with poor facilities and feeding strategies for dairy cows? Triple A is very effective at removing extreme characteristics over a herd population. Animals that are too tall, too narrow and too refined are lucky to reach 2nd lactation in these systems. They can hardly walk because their hock, hoof, reproductive and udder health is so bad. They also struggle to compete for feeding and resting space. I saw time and time again the notable difference between the health of long time Triple A herds and cows that were not the result of Triple A mating's. Triple A will not make these farms good dairy operations, not by a long shot. It will however give these animals a better quality of life and as animal rights and welfare issues become more of an influence in dairying farming policy I consider Triple A of critical importance.

I saw many examples of farms of longtime Triple A users with quite poor facilities but great milking cows. In these cases it was a combination of a really good understanding of animal nutrition, livestock skills and bull choices. The first thing you notice is feet and leg health. Probably the most definitive economic feature of these farms and probably all long time triple A users is that they are able to maintain low replacement rates in comparison to national averages. When you see the size of the typical young stock rearing facilities you immediately understand why it is such an advantage having low replacements and putting more time, feed and space into fewer high quality replacements. Farms that have to rear high numbers of replacement to maintain herd numbers are in a constant downward spiral because space restrictions and feed resources just mean that they can't do a good job of the animals they are rearing. Heifers enter herds under grown and the ineffective cycle begins again.

I saw several more traditional pedigree breeder herds that were just in the process of beginning to use Triple A. You see many examples of extremes in these herds. Multiple generations of bulls that have the same qualities and lack the same qualities lead to a very recognizable brand of cattle. The only thing keeping these properties off the knife-edge of dis-function was great husbandry, feeding and stalling. But even with these well set up farming systems the cows still lacked the essential balance for high lifetime milk production. Farmers with these systems and a pedigree based breeding philosophy were gravitating towards Triple A in Holland because they are fed up with cows failing to function over a long healthy productive life. Many of these farms hear of Triple A through word of mouth from other long time users achieving good results from the system.

Most AB companies in Holland are still quite anti Analysis usage. Veecom and Samen are two exceptions and their bull selection criteria are really starting to

factor in Analysis codes. It is very simple. There is an over whelming opportunity in Holland and by all accounts the Northern Hemisphere for 651, 561, 516, 615, 156 code bulls. These are the qualities lacking most in the Holstein population. Veecom and Samen recognize this gross lack of qualities and want to offer a product that caters to such insufficiency. Many of the other companies continue to provide plentiful options in the 243, 324, 213 etc categories but they just aren't producing the type of animals farmers need to produce milk in a profitable fashion. To mask this ineffective strategy they are marketing Flekvieh, Montebclairde and Brown Swiss aggressively to add substance and power to frail cattle. Even these breeds have codes favouring 243, 234, 423 codes and are sucking milk out of the vat because they just aren't addressing the population's problems. There is a profound disconnect between semen sales companies and farmers needs. I find it sad the world over how many farmers don't realize the cost these strategies are having on the overall effectiveness of their cattle and their families' livelihood. This is highlighted as many dairying nations face the perils of drastically reduced milk payments this season. If you have high vet bills and soaring feed cost, surviving becomes a lot harder.

The next type of farm you see is long time Triple A users, great barns, great stockman and great feeding and effluent management. These are very profitable farms and the farmers are a lot more relaxed themselves. Some of these properties are achieving huge lifetime production performance with low replacement rates. These farms have very few lame cows, low vet bills, the udder health is exceptional and the overall welfare of the animals is of an excellent standard. These farmers understand the relationship between all aspects of a farm as a system. They understand that no part of an operation is mutually exclusive from the rest. They appreciate the relationship between parts of a system. It is not a hard concept to grasp but farming has an element of tradition that sometimes limits evolution because by nature humans become comfortable with the standards they set. Becoming engaged and learning from others and being open to learning from others goes along way to making steady progress in any profession.

The best herd of cows I saw in The Netherlands was at John De Vries. He is a longtime Triple A user and I am disappointed I didn't get more time at this farm. He understands the relationship between parts of a system well and despite having a humble barn he does what he does well. He also gave me the impression that he has a lot of fun doing what he does. He is not afraid to work with outstanding and truly elite cattle, but he still expects them to have a great will to milk and function while also having exceptional type. He understands balancing qualities in cattle so well that he has no fear in using bulls to bring qualities his cows need in one generation. These are bulls that other farmers would often be terrified of using. Breeding really great cows requires that kind of confidence. His cows will continue to get better because he understands the recipe better than anybody.

It takes a very specific kind of person to be a good analyzer. It is not an exact science because it is human analysis. For this reason analyzers have to be disciplined, observant and methodical thinkers. It is not an easy process to

describe and many will always assume it is a similar to linear evaluation. Where linear stops analysis starts so it is more complicated than it appears to the naked eye. In analysis a cow is a map. You have to methodically follow the directions that her problem set leads you to. On some cows you follow the path the right way the first time but there are many you have to reverse on and retry a different path until you reach a point where you can really explain her problems and how they inter-relate to her overall biological function within a herd. Once you reach this point you must then make a decision on the most effective form of action to best alleviate her problems in one generation. When you think of applying this process to 200 plus animals a day you realize the mental requirements of an analyzer. You have to have exceptional discipline and an unconditional respect and passion for the dairy cow. The complexity of the thought process is something that means many want to be analyzer but few want to really learn. When you begin training you have to really fight to learn it because the information is so overwhelming at times it becomes toxic. I think it is also important for any analyzer to respect Bill Weeks as a quintessential "cow" man. For it is his ability to observe cows and put down on paper his observations that has given us the gift of Analysis as we know today. The moment you lose your respect for this man the moment you lose your way as an analyzer.

Jan Schilder's story of Analysis in Europe is of almost equal importance to Bill Weeks initial creation of the system in the 1940's. Jan was the first analyzer in Europe and has just recently celebrated 25 years of Triple A in Europe. I can personally testify to Jan's remarkable character and unwavering passion for analysis. He started off as a young man who didn't understand a word of English travelling with an American analyzer, battled court cases, no money and few clients and grew his analysis business. He is also directly responsible for its growth in Europe and particularly The Netherlands. You must understand that analyzers are basically independent contractors using the aAaWeeks system trademark to analyze cows. Jan has created an environment in Europe that means that all the analyzers have a lot of contact, are constantly using each other as information resources, and challenge each other to improve the way they analyze cows. It is this network that will serve as a model for Triple A and training new analyzers in the future. One of my biggest personal concerns about analyzing on the opposite side of the world is the lack of quality control being the only analyzer. It is my connection to this network of people that forms the basis for quality control and professionalism. I think as this networks grows and develops communication analyzers will find better ways of explaining the Triple A story to farmers.

There are many farmers in The Netherland that have expressed interest in analysis because they have heard such good reports from neighboring users of the system. They then decide not to use Triple A on their herds because there are too few high quality 651, 516, 561 etc coded bulls available from AB companies. There is truth in such a statement. However this is not an analysis problem it is an industry problem. Genomics and reduced generation intervals will only cause a manifestation of this problem in the coming decade. Triple A is still the only system that can bring the next generation back from the brink when these extremities result in progeny that is too sharp to live. It is for this reason, I

personally consider Triple A the most important breeding tool the dairy cattle population has at its disposal for creating a more profitable dairy cow.

All farmers want to breed more profitable cows. Despite farmers having the same goal-breeding cows has become so partisan in nature. Genomics vs daughter proven, High type vs high index, NZ bulls vs overseas bulls, CRV vs LIC. These topics are argued to the point of contempt resulting in no meaningful conclusion and certainly no compromise. This is the thing that I like most about Triple A. It does not say one cow is better than the other. It does not say one AB Company is better than the other. It does not say production is more important than type or high indexing cattle. It doesn't even say one bull is better than another. Regardless of a farmers personal preference it is merely a tool that provides farmers with a road map to improve the next generation.

I have heard too many people say over the years that farmers are dumb. This is not true and I do not believe for one minute that farmers are deliberately trying to breed bad cattle. Many are trying to do better but have yet to understand how to achieve better results. Naturally they gravitate towards the next silver bullet on the AB Companies shelf. Don't ever underestimate what a powerful tool skilled marketing is. Marketing can make a bad idea seem like a good idea. There is no greater example of this in history than Adolf Hitler and Joseph Goebbels. They took a terrible idea and sold it to a nation causing global devastation. Sadly there are many good ideas out there that aren't expressed well.

I think Triple A must work on the way in which the analysis story is told. Regardless of whether farmers decide to use Triple A as a breeding tool, the story of Bill Weeks and the balance between round and sharp is critically important to any dairy industry the world over. I believe Phillip Hashieder's book "Creating balance between form and function" should be considered compulsory reading for any farmer or student of agriculture. Even if you decide not to use analysis at the end of reading that book you will still be able to breed better cattle than you did prior.

At the end of my trip I went to the National Holstein show in Zwolle. There were some truly exceptional cows and some ordinary cows as well. The global dairy industries level of disenchantment with the show cow is real. Don't get me wrong there are great show cows that are also great cows. For some reason there is an inclination from judges and show breeders alike to create and promote an animal that goes against every instinct of dairyman the world over. Narrow is described as dairy. Extremely tall and sharp animals are considered fancy and stylish. Strength and width are considered lacking dairy quality. This says only one thing. People are dishonest. There is nothing more honest than a cow that has a highly refined udder and rear end but lacks the front-end width and capacity and strength to feed its metabolic functions. There is only one expression for this and it is animal cruelty. I cannot understand how judges and show breeders don't see this.

This leads me to my next point. Cattle fitting. The extent that people are prepared to go to win a show in some cases is despicable and this is also the case

in NZ. There is a line that is crossed too often in show preparation and it is by no means a fine line. With the exception of clipping anything whatsoever that is used to alter the appearance of an animal is completely unacceptable. Top lines, forced watering, silicon, oxytocin, forced CIDRs and botox etc besides being unimaginably cruel and dishonest serve only one purpose. They make it about the ego of the people as apposed to the quality of the cow. I will also add that photo-shop on any cattle photos (bulls and cows) is unacceptable. There is no value in the interest of progression in making any animal better than it is with photographic enhancement. I will happily stand alone on this as a matter of principle. Showing is an institution that should be protected by those who love it. It is a wonderful social experience and annual highlight for many farmers involved. But it must be about encouraging the best in cows.

In conclusion my time in Holland was a mind expanding and truly life changing experience. It consolidated my love of analysis and cows. It highlighted the opportunities and challenges that farmers' around the world face. It also showed me that farming is not as different on the other side of the world as what you might think. People are still people and cows are still cows. There is potential for Triple A anywhere there is cows. More than anything I learnt that nothing is more important than learning. The day you stop learning is the day you fall.