

Learning a Two-Way Street with Dairy Challenge

In the 10 years that the North American Intercollegiate Dairy Challenge (NAIDC) has been held, it has proven to be more than a learning experience for the students who participate. It's a learning opportunity for the dairy producers who host the event as well.

"It has been great for us to have young people who are enthused about the business bring fresh new ideas to the farm," noted Dana Metzger of Rock Rapids, Iowa. The 500-cow dairy he operates with his family, Multi-Rose Jerseys, was one of the host farms in 2007, when the national contest was co-sponsored by Iowa State University and South Dakota State University. "And having industry experts scrutinize every aspect of your management with a fine-tooth comb is another benefit of the Dairy Challenge."

Metzger has implemented several ideas that arose from the NAIDC, which challenges teams of four students to come up with recommendations to improve herd management. His decision to milk the herd three times a day rather than twice was one of the ideas that helped the Metzgers better utilize their new parlor and match parlor size to herd size.

Another Jersey producer who has benefitted from Dairy Challenge recommendations is Butch Dias, who hosted the national contest at Delta View Farms, home of Rachele's Jerseys, a 1,900-cow Registered Jersey dairy in Visalia, Calif., in 2010.

"When you get into a routine, you don't always look as closely at your protocol as you should," Dias commented. "Though

we had a good cell count before the contest, a few of the changes the students recommended for our milking procedures in the parlor have helped us boost milk quality even higher."



A competitor in the national Dairy Challenge takes notes on calf care protocol at Piedmont Jerseys. *Photo courtesy North American Intercollegiate Dairy Challenge.*

Whether the ideas that come from the Dairy Challenge are grand in scale or designed to tweak management, all agree the program is a win-win for students and host dairies alike.

"We learned from them while they were learning from us," summed Dennis Leamon of Lucky L Jerseys, Statesville, N.C., who hosted the 2008 Southern Regional Dairy Challenge and then a scrimmage for the national contest sponsored by North

Carolina State University and Virginia Tech this spring.

The Dairy Challenge

NAIDC includes a national contest and four regionals (Northeast, Midwest, Southern and Western). Regional events have a strong education focus, with students from various universities intermixed into teams of four. So that students can learn more from each other, organizers form teams based on students' experience level and specific area of expertise—nutrition, reproduction, finance for example.

The national contest is held in a different part of the country each year, with four local dairies serving as host farms. Four students represent each university team, with 30 schools at the 2011 national competing for platinum, gold and silver awards.

The Dairy Challenge is a three-day event. On the first evening, students receive detailed information about the farm—financial reports, production records, health statistics, nutrition analyses, farm history, goals and more—which they study to obtain an overall first impression of the business. On the second morning, students travel to the farm, where they tour the facilities, take photographs and video and observe the operation of the dairy. They have opportunity to visit with the herd owner in a group setting with other teams and then one-on-one with their fellow teammates. That evening, they prepare their presentation. On the third day, they present their recommendations to the judges, a panel of producers, veterinarians and industry professionals. The judges critique their presentations and question them on their recommendations. The judges then provide their own "official" recommendations for improving herd management.

The Presentation

Herd owners are encouraged to attend the presentations. After all, this is the fringe benefit of hosting the event and putting forth the effort to gather all the information required for the contest.

Students evaluate feeding protocol at the national Dairy Challenge hosted by Multi-Rose Jerseys in 2007. The dairy has implemented several recommendations that have improved profitability. *Photo courtesy North American Intercollegiate Dairy Challenge.*



Dias took in the presentations with his sons, Darren and Greg, who are partners with him in Delta View Farms. “We went very early, stayed all day and listened to every presentation and every critique.”

“This was the real learning point for us,” Dias noted.

“When you host this event, you have to be open for the feedback—positive and negative—and be comfortable with what you’ve presented.

“Our approach is that we are always willing to learn something new.”

For Metzger, listening to what the students and judges recommended for his operation was financially rewarding. In addition to milking the herd three times a day, Multi-Rose Jerseys has implemented other student ideas that have helped improve efficiency, reduce metabolic problems and increase fertility.

“We changed our fresh cow program using recommendations that came from the Dairy Challenge,” noted Metzger.

Multi-Rose Jerseys had been milking fresh cows in the old parlor for about a week and then moving them to the new barn with the rest of the herd, to be grouped in pens of 120 cows based on age or parity. The dairy now has a separate fresh cow pen at the new barn for about 60 cows. They are milked in the new parlor and kept in the fresh cow pen, which has a much lower stocking rate, for 2-3 weeks. They are then moved to the larger groups.

“Peaks on our fresh cows are now much higher than they were before and we see fewer metabolic problems like ketosis or displaced abomasums,” Metzger explained. “Another bonus, from a labor standpoint, is that we move the cows around one less time.”

The dairy also tweaked its reproduction program after students noted that days open on the milking string were a little higher than benchmarks.

“We’ve gotten more aggressive about catching cows that aren’t cycling,” said Metzger. “We’ve set up a file on the computer that sorts cows that are 50 days in milk and not bred and then start them on synchronized ovulation.”

Another Jersey breeder who benefitted

from the Dairy Challenge was Corey Lutz, Piedmont Jerseys, Lincolnton, N.C., who hosted the national contest this spring. Lutz jumped at the chance to host the event after he saw how much his stepson, James Pearson, had learned from the national contest hosted by Cal Poly and Fresno State in 2010.

“When I attended the presentation, I

cows,” said Lutz. “We had been coarsely processing silage with whole grains of corn, so decided to chop it finer this summer.

“Though it is too early to weigh outcome in terms of production, our nutritionist said our corn silage is as good as any he’s seen. This is especially critical to us because we want to get every ounce of nutrition we can out of our feed.”

Every recommendation that comes from the Dairy Challenge may not be financially feasible or practical at the time, but may be implemented down the road, as resources or situations change, noted Lutz.

“One of the recommendations that came from a panelist was to use our irrigation system more heavily,” Lutz recalled. “We know we need to do this, but labor prevents us from doing it at this point. When James returns to the farm and we have an extra hand, we may be in a position to adopt that idea.”

Rewarding Experience

For many dairy producers, the joy that comes from hosting the NAIDC has nothing to do with the bottom line. It has to do with love of the business and educating the next generation of dairy producers.

“Since we are seeing fewer and fewer young people stay in this business, it has been especially rewarding for me to see college-aged young people active and actively involved in the industry through programs like the Dairy Challenge,” Dias commented.

“I would like to see more Jersey breeders participate, so students and future dairy producers can develop a greater appreciation for the Jersey cow.”

Two other Jersey breeders that are doing their part are Lutz and

Leamon.

“A lot of the kids that came to our farm had no experience with Jerseys or a grass-based system,” said Lutz. “Just seeing them grasp the concept that there is more than one way of dairying made us feel good about our operation.

“We enjoyed showing the students that this is a system they can make money with. It is a way those with no dairy experience or

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Some of the students from the southern regional contest pose with host Dennis Leamon, sixth right, and Lucky L Jerseys in 2008. Photo courtesy Dr. Steve Washburn/Extension Specialist NC State.



Students that participated in the national Dairy Challenge this spring interacted with herd owner, Corey Lutz, to learn more about the operation so they could make recommendations suited to the Piedmont Jerseys operation. Photo courtesy North American Intercollegiate Dairy Challenge.

noticed right off that the vaccine we had been using for leptospirosis was not the product we had ordered,” said Lutz. “The company sent us the wrong vaccine.”

The catch alone was worth all the effort of hosting the contest. But Lutz implemented other recommendations as well, including the way in which corn silage was processed.

“Most of the schools picked up that we were sending a lot of corn through our

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little capital can get their feet in the door.”

Leamon echoed his sentiments. “It was an eye opener for many students to see that you can operate profitably with Jerseys on grass without a total mixed ration or freestalls.”

The Jersey breed has recognized the value of the NAIDC from the onset. The American Jersey Cattle Association and National All-Jersey Inc. were among 34 foundation sponsors and have supported the contest ever since.

Since the first national contest was hosted at Michigan State University in 2002, participation in the Dairy Challenge has doubled. Over the past decade, 3,076 students from 52 schools have participated in national and regional contests.

“Though they didn’t have this program when I was going through school, I wish they had,” said Metzger. “I would have loved to participate. This is a great opportunity for production-oriented students to troubleshoot in a team environment and put all their skills to work to see what they can do to better the bottom line.”

And while they are at it, host dairies can benefit as well.

For more information, visit www.dairychallenge.org or [wwwfacebook.com/DairyChallenge](https://www.facebook.com/DairyChallenge) or follow at DairyChallenge on Twitter.