

Winning the second half – how do cows experience your farm?

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A lot happens in the first 150 days of a cow's lactation, but to a large extent, the game is decided in the second half. How can we win the second half?

As cows are putting on weight, they often have further to walk and like many players, they are getting tired after doing a lot of work. The autumn is the best time of the year for farmers to influence cow body condition. A herd lameness problem can arise very quickly in the autumn. Cows have a hunger for work in early lactation, but it can be a different story later in the year.

It is recommended that all farmers write out a plan for the remainder of the year. For most farmers, going on a holiday takes a lot of planning and preparation. In the same way, some planning will help to have a good end of season and it will also set yourself up for next year.

Cow care in mid-summer

- Systematically check cows for lameness or impending lameness (a stone recently trapped between the claws, etc) and treat accordingly. This can be done by giving each cow a locomotion score or by checking how each cow is standing and walking, especially the cows at the rear of the herd.

White line disease is very common, especially following periods of heavy rainfall and it can affect both back and front feet. Breakdown of the white line allows the entry of grit and dirt. This condition can readily be treated by hoof pairing. Foot bathing is only recommended for treating mortellaro (digital dermatitis) and footrot.

Foot bathing twice a week is recommended to bring mortellaro under control. Please see: <https://ahdb.org.uk/knowledge-library/mobility-scoring-for-dairy-cows>.

- Scan and condition score cows. Cows use feed very efficiently in the second



This first lactation animal calved on the 5 April (photographed on 22 May). Her size is good but her body condition will need to be monitored. She must be looked after next winter by having at least a three month dry period.

half of the lactation, so it makes sense to supplement cows that are destined for culling in the autumn or after one week post-calving. This will allow you to manage the peak milk supply next year.

- Supplement magnesium in the cow's diet throughout the year. It reduces stress on the cows by helping muscles to relax including the heart muscle. Ensure 30g per cow per day is included in the diet to prevent grass tetany, but 15-20g is normally adequate in dry warm weather when the risk is low.

Many first lactation animals fail to reach their potential because of com-

petition for feed space in their first winter with the full herd.

Are there problems arising on your farm?

- Are cows following a trail on the farm roadway? The surface may be poor with stones becoming exposed, so cows won't use the full width of the roadway.

- Are cows slowing down or even stopping at a section of the roadway? This can happen where there is a depression in the roadway or where there is a mucky section with a lot of shade from overhanging trees.



- Cows may be slow to leave paddocks because the exit has become degraded over time.
- Cows crowding each other at a gathering point before they cross a public road can be a problem. An underpass is the solution of choice. Some farmers have their own pressure release mechanism, such as holding the cows with a wire a few metres before the roadside gate. This wire can be released to reduce the pressure prior to crossing the road.
- The section of roadway nearest the farmyard and especially where cows step onto concrete needs careful attention. There is no 'give' in concrete, so loose stone on concrete is not satisfactory. Topping up the dust on the stretch of roadway before the concrete surface will help to trap stones.
- We need to recognise that these issues can become a big problem when there is a change in personnel and cows are rushed around milking time.

Cow flow through the milking parlour

As cows are heavier in the autumn, the size of the collecting yard can become an issue. We recommend a minimum of 1.5m² per cow, preferably 1.8m² for cows 580kg in weight.

A dedicated collecting yard and a carefully operated backing gate can reduce milking time. The milker should not have to leave the parlour pit to bring cows in.

If cows are approached 'head on' they will tend to back away. Level non-slip concrete surfaces and having adequate light in the parlour will facilitate good cow movement.

Cows have a rigid backbone from the shoulder to the tail head, so it is important to minimize turning. Cows are also sensitive to the emotional state of the farmer or milker, so leave anything that is annoying you outside the parlour.



A fresh looking fourth lactation 'silent' (she gives no trouble) cow. She did 582kg milk solids in 2020 and has a maintenance sub index of €25.

Five in a row (for all our cows!)

The national average of completed lactations per cow is low, at under four. We would like to increase this to five.

This is a significant cost in terms of the extra replacements needed, the loss in production in having a less mature herd profile and a higher carbon footprint for the output achieved.

Increasing this by one lactation per cow would increase herd profitability

by approximately €100 per cow.

I have no doubt that where cows' needs are met in winter accommodation, they will in turn deliver for the farmer. There will be fewer downer cows, less lameness and cows will calve down in better condition.

Having adequate feed space simplifies winter herd management and it can often mean feeding costly ration is not necessary for cows that are somewhat below the desired condition score. All of this will lead to less stress on the cows and farmer, as well as better performance.

Cows are herd animals, they like to be together while eating and lying down. In the past, we foolishly thought otherwise. The Sustainable Dairy Assurance Scheme (SDAS) obliges farmers to provide at least one cubicle per cow.

The Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine (DAFM) Building Specifications have been an enormous help in raising building standards in recent years.

Many farmers are delighted with how cows are responding to new cubicle accommodation, where they have more space and do not have to compete to get to the feed barrier.

Farmers have said to me that it was only then that they realised just how bad the old accommodation was.

Teagasc researchers carried out a study in 2019 to investigate welfare and lameness on 103 Irish dairy farms. As part of this study, dairy cows were mobility scored to determine the prevalence of and factors associated with lameness.