

aAa basic for excellent breeding results for Hoogeveen and De Vries

# 'For years no bad heifers anymore'

With an average of 87.3 the 16 first calving heifers of John de Vries of Boijl had the highest classification for exterior in the Netherlands for 2008. His neighbor Martie Hoogeveen of Vlederveen with 13,462 kg milk per cow was the highest production in the Netherlands. Both farmers last week Saturday hosted an open day for members of the Triple-A farmers club (aAa users group) on the day of their annual meeting.

By: Anne Hiemstra  
Photos: Noordoost, G. Burgers

Before the visits to the herds of Hoogeveen and De Vries, last Saturday morning was the heavily attended annual meeting of the Triple-A farmers club (aAa users group) in Frederiksoord. Both farmers told the members that 12 years ago they attended a meeting of their farmer study club and learned about aAa from Jan Schilder. They were impressed by this breeding philosophy and began using it in their herds.

## Exterior not important

The figures of the 36 cows of Martie and Linie Hoogeveen are impressive. With a rolling herd average of 13,462 kg milk with 3.93% fat and 3.50% protein made Hoogeveen the highest production herd of the Netherlands in 2008. This is accompanied by the impressive exterior classification average of 87.1 points for the herd. Interestingly Hoogeveen says exterior score is not important. "We don't do anything with it, although it is handy when you are selling."

The ration that the farmer gives his cows is 50% grass silage and 50% corn, putting the bales of grass silage in front of the feeding gate. Beside this he is feeding 8 kg of by-products, 1 or 2

kg soy, 2 kg grass pellets, and as much dry hay as they want. The heifers get a maximum 8 kg of concentrate per day and the cows get a maximum of 10 kg per day. In the summer during the day the cows are in the pasture. "The total feeding cost including heifers is 9 Euro cent per Kilo of milk", said the farmer.

## Old bulls

When Martie Hoogeveen was around 15 years old he became interested in breeding. Since that time they have not needed to buy replacements and have used all-around bulls. Hoogeveen did not care about INET and breeding values played no role in his selection of bulls. Today even old bulls such as Triple Threat, Tops and Sheik get a chance. "My motto is you can use a bull too early, but you can never use a bull too late."

"The good thing about the aAa-system is that the "why" question is always asked. With each problem the cause or reason is addressed so in the next generation it can be remedied", Hoogeveen said. "For fun one time I used the Sire Advise Program (SAP) from CRV with 100% emphasis on exterior with only the bulls that I had in my tank. Many of their recommendations were anti-codes (opposite of what the cow needed)", says the farmer about the aAa numbers (of the bulls and his



Top breeder John de Vries shows his cows to the attendees of the annual meeting of the Triple-A Association (aAa users).

cows). "But maybe SAP can also work," he states jokingly. The bull use in the herd is with bulls such as Boss Iron, Design, Donato, Mtoto, Oman and Scooby Duu very diverse.

Because of the exceptional results in this herd you may think Hoogeveen spends all his time in the barn. That is not true. "We prefer a herd of this modest size because I like to do many different things on my farm. Sometimes I like to sit on the tractor and even when we go to a show I still want to do all the field work myself."

## Big heifers

John de Vries uses a very similar breeding philosophy. "aAa is very important in my breeding program, but in developing good cows breeding is only 20%," he prickled the audience. His cows

score an exterior classification average of an extremely high 88.3 points, with an average production of 11,000 kg milk, 4.10% fat and 3.50% protein. With a feeding cost of 6 Euro cents per liter milk.

De Vries usually sells many young animals each year as breeding stock and as a result he saw his herds average age increase to 6 years 4 months. "Because with older cows the farm is more vulnerable, I decided for one year to keep all my first calving heifers not selling any", says the farmer. Those 16 heifers scored on exterior classification an average of 87.3 points, the highest in the Netherlands, also De Vries gives no value to classification information. "I don't do anything with it, but of course the figures are important for the breeding values of the bulls." Special is that all the heifers calved within 2 years of age and still had an average score for stature of 1.55 meters.

## By feeling

"Raising the young stock is really important", says De Vries. "First you must feed much protein and later much fiber. Calves that eat hay after one week is ridiculous, you don't feed a one week old baby a Quarter Pounder and Fries." Once every three days he gives the cows grass and two times per day dry corn. The cows get all the hay they will eat. What the cows don't eat is fed to the heifers and dry cows. Mixing feed is not necessary, stated De Vries. "Cows are excellent in deciding for themselves what they should eat."

Before John de Vries started using aAa he also did not look at indexes, he made breeding decision purely by feeling. "When I got deeply into aAa I understood completely that when a cow has a problem you can solve that in

the next generation. The cows become more balanced. I don't remember having a bad heifer in recent years." The use of bulls such as Shottle, Scooby Duu, Benson, Tiamo, Active, Boss Iron, Lheros, Talent and Bookie is also quite diverse.

## Sick hocks

Although his homebred heifer Venetie 5 (Goldwyn x Rembrandt) last summer won the NRM (Dutch National Show), De Vries asked himself whether he still feels at home in the show ring. "It goes really far at the present time. My cows don't have privileges, all are in one management group", states De Vries. Sick cows on the other hand get all my attention. "I have higher vet costs perhaps than the average farmer because I quickly use infusions and pain medications." That does not mean the cows are not robust or durable. "In one year I sold 24 cows to another farmer who keeps significantly more cows in his herd than his number of stalls in his barn, but my animals he reports could compete well there."

Last year De Vries sold 5 cows for slaughter that produced an average of 80,000 kg milk. He also has developed nine 100,000 plus kg milk cows. However, the farmer calls that not important. "That is not the priority, it is more about what you are willing to accept and how far are you willing to go working with older cows", for example, with some what higher somatic cell counts. The old cows produce an average of 14,000 kg milk and many are bigger than 1.60 meters. "But there is no cow in the herd with a sick hock", says John de Vries, who has an old free stall style concrete barn with deep bedding stalls. "Problems such as sick hocks are always caused by the farmer himself."



The ten year old Marijke 50 (Archibald x Accid Buck-Val) from Martie and Linie Hoogeveen of Vlederveen, produced to date 112,000 kg milk. Her Shottle son recently went to K.I. Kampen.