

HEIFER REARING COMPETITION

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Down farmers claim heifer rearing competition for top class stock

This week, we reveal the winner of the National Heifer Rearing Competition.

Jack Kennedy reports

Christopher Catherwood is farm manager for the Catherwood/Rankin equity partnership near Newtownards, Co Down.

Last Friday, Chris was crowned the Heifer Rearing Champion 2011. Why did Chris win?

Some of the reasons include simplicity of operation, attention to detail, top class stock and cost performance together with a sound understanding of the critical components of heifer rearing.

With the Rankin family, Chris is farming 121ha in total (300 acres with 50% owned/leased) and all is available for grazing by the milking herd. This herd is 100% spring calving which is unusual for Northern Ireland but farmers in the Ards can grow very good grass in spring and get cows out grazing early.

NEWBORNS

Calves are born in a large, straw-bedded, open shed where cows near calving have easy feed silage at all times. All calves are stomach tubed on arrival with biestings. Calves are reared in small groups off ve to 10 on teat feeders that have individual compartments so the feeder knows what each calf



The Catherwood/Rankin calves that were weaned off milk powder at just over six weeks of age outside on meals and good quality grass in the April sunshine.

is drinking. For the first five to seven days, calves are fed twice a day on pooled whole milk. On day seven onwards, they go on once-a-day milk powder and ad-lib meal and straw. They get 600g of powder in a three-litre feed. By week six to seven, Christopher is ready to wean calves. Calves born on 1 February this year were weaned off milk powder on 13 March

and we saw them at grass in very good form at 12 weeks of age. They continue to get weaner mix and calf weaner nuts. Bull calves are sold off the farm twice a week during the calving season.

HEALTH

A calf scour is treated with lactadex and maybe an injection if very bad. A case of pneumonia is treated with

antibiotics (Nuflor). This year, Chris has 65 heifer calves and, last year, he ended up with 77 replacement heifers. Surplus replacements are sold when they in calf.

Calves continue to get 1kg to 2kg of meal until early July and then they are cut off. They will be on grass only then until mid-November when they will go inside to a cubicle shed on good silage and 1kg of meal.

The 10 lightest heifers will be kept separate for special treatment when indoors.

HEIFER WEIGHTS

A requirement of the competition is that a selection of calves, maiden heifers and first calvers are weighed. When the weigh bridge called in late April to this farm, the group off ate February and early March born calves were weighed and were 71kg, on average, ranging from 56kg for a one month old calf to 80kg for a calf born on 18 February.

The 76 maiden heifers were weighed on 22 April also and they averaged 343kg for February/March born heifers. They ranged from 310kg right up to 400kg for a heifer born on 4 February 2010. Each year, maiden heifers are turned out to grass in early February.

HERD YIELD

The herd is Kiwi Friesian/Jersey crossbred and Chris uses some Montbelliarde type bulls on the cows towards the end of the breeding season to increase the value of the calves that will be sold. Jersey sires have not been used for the last four years as they feel they have enough Jersey in the herd for the moment and are aiming to increase size and milk solids.

The DARD dairy heifer replacement report suggests Chris is rearing a heifer for about £400/head (€460) to the point of calving. This excludes heifer calf value, opportunity cost of owned and family labour costs. If we include an estimate on each of these costs, it would bring the total cost closer to £650/heifer (€750).

The Chris Catherwood/Rankin family are milking 185 spring calving cows and, this year, they have 65 dairy heifer calves. Average milk yield last year (305 days) was 6,450 litres per cow at 4.42% fat and 3.48% protein (524kg MS) on 900kg of meal and grazed grass with a calving interval of 365 days. They breed for six to seven weeks with AI and then sweeper bulls clean up for another six to seven weeks.

KEY POINTS

- Farm manager and equity partner Chris Catherwood, Newtownards, Co Down
- Milking 195 cows with 100% spring calving.
- This year, Chris has 65 dairy replacement heifer calves and 76 maiden heifers.
- AI used on herd and maiden heifers. This year, all 76 maiden heifers (100%) were inseminated by day 18 of breeding.

Roll of honour

Overall winner who receives a Volac computerised calf eeder:

- Christopher Catherwood, Carrowdore, Newtownards, Co Down.

Regional winners who will each receive one tonne of Volac Blossom Easy Mix calf milk replacer:

- The Tallon family, Garristown, Co Meath.
- The Keane family, Kilmachthomas, Co Waterford.
- Mervyn Kearney, Salesian College Pallaskey, Co Limerick.
- The O'Sullivan family, Kilbrea, Clonkilty, Co Cork.

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