

Keeping the Family in the Farm

Decisively woven between the acres of tangled vines constructing two of California's largest vineyards rests Van Exel Holsteins and Jerseys. Patrons of Interstate-5 driving through Lodi have a spectacular view of the countryside known for having a landscape dotted with grapes and dairy cows. The dairy farm rests on either side of the interstate, broken up only by the stakes of the winery.

The Van Exel family farm is home to more than just the 1,700 milking cows split between two locations a mile apart. It is also home to almost the entire family, with each person involved on at least a part-time level. Family patriarchs Hank and Carolyn Van Exel, the current owners of the farm, have worked hard to guarantee their children have a place in the operation that best fits their skills.

Building the Family Foundation

The dairy was started 57 years ago with 60 grade Holsteins purchased by Hank's father. While he initially had little appreciation for the registered side of the industry, he supported his son, Hank, who had developed an aptitude for showing cattle and especially judging cattle.

In pursuit of this skill, Hank began making his rounds as a dairy aficionado, and 25 years ago he found himself in Ferndale, Wash., judging a local show.

After awarding top honors of the event to a group of Jerseys from Shannon Lorenzo's "Poly" family, Hank decided to make an offer on those captivating brown cows. Knowing his time was limited, as he had a wedding to attend that same weekend, he negotiated quickly and ended up leaving with the very animals he had named grand champion, reserve grand champion and junior champion of the Ferndale show, and two

additional Jerseys from the Lorenzo herd.

These animals became the foundation of the new lineup at the Van Exel farm, which currently boasts 283-head of Registered Jerseys. Although the Holsteins make up the majority of the farm, the Van Exel's have taken much pride in owning outstanding Jerseys. After his initial purchase in Washington, Hank took his new string to World Dairy Expo and the Royal Agricultural Winter Fair in Canada where they won their classes, and tipped Hank's excitement to a new level.

himself having to prove the value of a product or practice to his family and peers. He had already gone to bat for the idea of owning a mixed herd, which is becoming a standard in today's industry. However, while working for his father, Hank was also continuously trying to prove to him that registered cattle were a worthwhile investment. The Jersey REAP herd at the Van Exel herd is now completely registered.

"My dad pushed and motivated me," said Hank. "My 'If we're going to do it, it better work' attitude came from my father." That

outlook has helped not only develop the well-being of the farm, but the base of the family business plan.

Ties That Bind

Having two well-known and prominent herds would not be nearly as rewarding for Hank had he not been able to bring his family on board, which was a venture he did not enter into lightly.

"I originally tried to get the kids to go somewhere else," said Hank of the experiences he wanted his son, Adam, and two daughters, Sarah and Jenny, to have before deciding to work for him. "Wanting your kids to be part of the farm is the most

difficult job a dairy producer can have. It's not always fair and equal; and what's fair and equal are very different things."

When trying to figure out the best way to accommodate his whole family on the farm, Hank developed one very simple, but pertinent rule: if his kids were going to come back, they had to find a way for the farm to make or save more money. In a sentiment Hank echoed from his father, he told his family "if they were going to do this, it had better work." Understanding that the dairy was first and foremost, a business from which they drew their livelihood, was a big step in putting everyone on the same



The Van Exel family at the 2011 California Spring Dairy Show, where they took home the banners for both Premier Breeder and Premier Exhibitor. From left to right, Adam with Atlee, Lacey with Madison, Jarett Zonneveld with Jackson, Sarah Zonneveld, family friends Jenny and Nathan Thomas with son Colton, and Carolyn and Hank. Kneeling in the front are, Zach Evers, Brian Bauer and Briar Jeg. Not pictured are Jennifer and Brian Dongelmans.

He began purchasing more Jerseys by the truckload where he would pick the best ones, then sell the others. Hank viewed this new endeavor as an opportunity to up the ante of his Holstein herd component production and join the Hilmar Cheese Company to take advantage of the benefits derived from the high protein-producing brown cows, which has helped their bottom line.

Even though Hank was "catching a lot of flack" from some of his peers about his new mixed herd, he was convinced there were many perks of developing Jerseys alongside his already accomplished Holsteins.

This was not the first time Hank found

payroll.

He admits it was a difficult situation as they tried to find ways to alleviate some of their costs and ways to bring in more income. One issue was deciding if they needed to milk more cows, or find a way to get more for what they were already doing. It was difficult to think about expanding the farm with little, to no stability in the market, making it seemingly impossible to forecast the finances of such an undertaking.

The Van Exels have also considered the different income avenues that could be generated from their Jersey herd, like marketing bulls, and if there were any other farming endeavors they might be able to pursue outside of dairy.

The Family that Farms Together

Walking into the office of Van Exel farm is like entering a very busy bus terminal, with Carolyn in the office every day and their daughter Jenny (Dongelmans), working there three to four days a week as she helps with her husband's BouMatic dealership the rest of the time. Adam's wife, Lacey, can also be found in the office where she handles the registrations, or in the barn taking care of the show calves. Daughter Sarah (Zonneveld) can often times be found at the dairy as she handles the farm's webpage, in addition to helping at her husband's family farm. Adam and Hank often times swap duties on a day-to-day basis, with Adam generally handling the show cattle, crops and working as the relief breeder.

So far the risk this family took by all working together has paid off. By having all the different family members trying to find ways to be more cost efficient, they have been able to cross reference every expense they have to make sure they are controlling expenditures as much as possible. They have even managed to keep the medicine costs down thanks to the extra care of added family and be more efficient in every aspect of the dairy. An added benefit has been that Hank and Carolyn have started slowly fazing themselves out of the day-to-day operations, which has allowed Hank to judge more shows, including The All American Jersey show coming up in November for the second time, also having served as a consultant for two previous years.

One of the best parts of their arrangement, however, is the fact that both of Adam and Lacey's children, Madison, 2, and Atlee, 6 months, and Sarah's son, Jackson, 2,

have their own private daycare in the back of the office. Madison has already been given chores and looks forward to helping Carolyn open and sort the mail, a task to which she supplies much diligence.

Separating the Milk From the Solids

That is not to say the Van Exels are not aware of the problems that can develop from having a family work so close together, but Hank has identified ways around that.

"You do not have to work together to be a family farm," said Hank of the challenges of signing the paychecks for his children. "Everyone must have their own thing going on, and earn their own way. If not, you are all setting yourself up for problems."

Part of the challenge of working together, Hank says, is knowing how to separate your home life and work life, because if not handled properly, treading down the wrong side of this fine line, can ruin a family. Balancing relationships between a parent/employer and a son or daughter/employee can be some of the most difficult relationships and business decisions any business owner can manage.

"I'm a difficult guy to work for," Hank laughed in regards to maintaining a happy work environment, which he considers one of the biggest challenges for a family farm. "It is really just a great life to have, especially when it is a place you can all be together."

Reaping the Benefits

Owning Registered Jerseys has also provided the Van Exel family with many opportunities to share experiences together, even when not at the farm. They recently took their show string and a motorhome to the California Spring Show, where they all spent time together and ended up leaving with the banners for Premier Breeder and Premier Exhibitor. Thanks to the many dairy events Hank has judged throughout the world, his family has had the opportunity to share these experiences with him, and build their own memories and industry relationships.

"When we go to places like Madison to World Dairy Expo, my kids know just as many people as I do, and now my grandkids are exposed to the same thing," said Hank of the experiences they have had as a family, in part thanks to owning Registered Jerseys and being a member of the American Jersey Cattle Association.

They have also cultivated a name for



The fourth generation of the Van Exel family to reside on the farm in Lodi, California, Madison Van Exel, poses with one of her favorite Jersey heifers, Exels Action Dakota 2316.

themselves among the Jersey show circuit, regularly competing in shows and attending Jersey events, including breeding and exhibiting the 2003 National Jersey Jug Futurity winner, Excels Success 954. In addition to the premier banners they were awarded at the California Spring Show, they took home accolades for the two-time Senior and Grand Champion, Exels Elite Ada 1938, Excellent 91%, and the Reserve Junior Champion, GR Exels Barbaro Foxy 2163.

Success has also manifested itself in the bulk tank, with the May 2011 rolling herd average on 283 cows of 19,500 lbs. milk, 938 lbs. fat and 711 lbs. protein. They currently have 50 Excellent cows and 143 Very Good cows in their herd, among countless show winnings. They are the breeders of Exels Carrier Polly 2109, the Reserve Junior Champion of the 2010 All American Jersey Show in Louisville, Ky.

For the Van Exel family, their business is their family. Though it is no secret that maintaining a dairy farm that supports four generations is quite the undertaking, this family has taken the challenges in stride as an opportunity to improve their farm and family ties. While their family continues to grow, they are constantly re-evaluating the different aspects of the dairy. Because as Hank Van Exel was told many years ago, "if you are going to do something, it had better work."