

Progressive Dairy Producer of the Year

~Nicole Mackinder

Minimizing stress and maximizing comfort and efficiency were the primary goals of Leon Van Loon as he set out to design his new dairy. A few years and two barns later the St. Louis, Michigan, dairy producer has definitely created an environment where his cows are comfortable, so much in fact that they have increased production by over 7,000 pounds of milk; an increase which helped earn Van Loon the 2005 NorthStar Cooperative Progressive Dairy Producer of the Year award.

Home to nearly 3,000 Holsteins, over the past five years Mibelloon Dairy has increased production by 7,058 pounds of milk, 384 pounds of fat, 183 pounds of protein and \$1,173 dollar value. Today the herd boasts a rolling herd average on three times a day milking of 27,123 pounds of milk, 1,062 pounds of fat, 792 pounds of protein, and a \$4,013 dollar value.

Starting with about 500 cows in a leased facility, Van Loon had immediate plans to expand. With cow comfort in mind he began plans for the St. Louis facility which would house over 1,100 cows.

“We learned a lot about cow comfort and ways to better manage the herd while at our first location,” states Van Loon. “The cows didn’t have enough room to rest and the

traffic flow was stressful for them. Milking in that facility while the new one was being planned gave us daily reminders of cow comfort issues as we designed the new barn.”

First on Van Loon’s list was a comfortable place for cows to rest. Free stalls were designed to be 7 and 1/2 feet long and nearly 4 feet wide. “The cows lay down whenever they need to and shouldn’t worry about getting caught when they get up or they will be less likely to lie down,” states Van Loon.

Once moved to the St. Louis facility cows were milked three times a day, but a growing herd size forced milkings back to twice a day and production dropped. “When we got too big for barn #1 and had to go back to two times a day we lost thirteen pounds of milk per day

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~Leon Van Loon*

per cow,” states Van Loon.

Within two years of moving the cows to the St. Louis facility Van Loon decided to expand the herd. Always looking to improve, Van Loon concentrated on minimizing stress and increasing efficiency in barn #2.

A key element for improved efficiency of barn #2 was the installation of a 60-cow rotary parlor. Unlike the existing double-20 parlor, the rotary parlor allows constant entry to the carousel, dramatically reducing the wait in the holding pen and milking time.

“With the rotary parlor we are able to milk 360 – 400 cows per hour,” states Van Loon.

“Our goal for the length of time cows spend in the holding pen was one hour. With the efficiency of the rotary parlor they



**Gurt, Walter, and Leon Van Loon,
Mibelloon Dairy**

don’t stand in the holding pen any longer than 45 minutes.”

Although creating two barns devoted to cow comfort and efficiency has certainly played a major role in the success of Mibelloon, a unique management style has also been key to the dairy’s success. Van Loon believes that every cow must be cared for every day as if she was the only cow on the farm and he passes that expectation on to his employees.

“I tell our employees to treat our facility like a church; keep things clean, quiet and consistent,” states Van Loon. “You have to take care of things and treat the cows well or pretty soon you won’t have a place to take care of your cows and they won’t produce for you.”

Primarily run by family members, Van Loon’s wife and sons play a major role in the daily activities of Mibelloon. With the recent expansions, however, the addition of two new herd managers has been a welcomed change. “Although it has been challenging with so much change, the most important thing we have at Mibelloon is people who can think for themselves and that hasn’t changed,” remarked Van Loon.

The NorthStar Cooperative Progressive Dairy Producer Award is presented to the producer who has shown the greatest total increase in dollar value over the previous five years. The award is available to all NorthStar DHI producers.

