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Good management for the springers pays dividends

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Good management for the "springers" pays dividends

This article gives a striking example of the advantages of calving cows in good and rising condition—and explains why condition around calving time is so important.

By J. Y. LANGDON, B.Sc. (Agric.), Agricultural Adviser, Harvey

ALTHOUGH most farmers know that cows calving in good and improving condition will give higher yields than those calving in poor condition, few use this knowledge to improve the production from their cows.

It is not often realised just how much difference this can make. In fact, it can make a difference of well over 100 lb. of fat or the equivalent amount of milk, per lactation.

This was very clearly illustrated by one herd in the Harvey district. In one year the cows calved in low condition but next year had improved considerably and were able to produce more to their capacity. The amounts of feed available per cow, after calving, were approximately equal in both years, and they calved in the same period. The cows are listed below in order of production for the first year:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>INDIVIDUAL PRODUCTION</th>
<th>(lb. of butterfat)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cow No.</td>
<td>1st Year (Poor Condition)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>45</td>
<td>362</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>281</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27</td>
<td>278</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>39</td>
<td>249</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>230</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>53</td>
<td>228</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>220</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35</td>
<td>204</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>49</td>
<td>197</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>38</td>
<td>180</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21</td>
<td>169</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>136</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>2,734</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average</td>
<td>228</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Before calving the cow’s condition should be progressively improved by access to more or better quality feed. This will ensure that the calf will be well grown and that the milk-secreting tissues will be well prepared for the on-coming lactation.

Most cows gave a substantial increase in production in the second year. Only two of the 12 declined in production; one of these calved in very low condition in the second year, and the other calved at an interval of 11 months.

Several features are very significant:

First, the best cows had the highest production in both the good and the bad conditions, and the order of production was remarkably similar in both years. This was particularly true of the four heifers.

Second, the best cows gave very large increases, while the poorer cows improved only slightly. In other words some of these cows were extremely efficient in producing milk, but needed good management to make full use of their ability. This ability is inherited to a large degree.

**How does condition affect production?**

How does condition at calving affect production so greatly over a lactation?

Before calving, several important changes take place, each having a definite priority.

1. The calf has the highest priority and grows rapidly in the last months of gestation. Because it has the first priority, calf weights are fairly constant within a breed, unless the mother is in very low condition.

2. The milk producing tissues in the udder develop in preparation for the new lactation. Unless this development takes place production is reduced, because only limited increase in the tissues can occur after the cow calves and milking begins. After the needs for the unborn calf have been met, the development of the tissues in the udder has the next priority.

3. The condition of the cow herself has the lowest priority. If she is improving in condition before calving, it signifies that the needs of the calf have been met and that the udder is being prepared for lactation.

   It is important that the cow be **improving** in condition and not just be in good condition prior to calving.

**Good condition essential**

It is also important that when the cow calves she should be in very good condition, with adequate reserves of fat and minerals for the stresses that occur when lactation commences.

The intake of food is often reduced before calving, because the growing calf restricts the capacity of the rumen and gut. After calving the cow will draw on her body reserves unless she can be grazed on highly productive pastures. For some weeks after calving digestion efficiency is lowered and it is not until the third
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month of lactation that it becomes fully efficient. It is in this period that milk production is at its highest and even a moderate producer needs to be specially fed to maintain production and condition. All-too-frequently there is a considerable loss of weight following calving.

If too much condition is lost milk production will slow down and may ultimately cease. Once production has slowed down recovery will be difficult even when feed is plentiful. Consequently it is important to supply enough nutrients, not only for production, but also to maintain condition.

It is important not to make sudden changes to the diet when cows start milking. This can occur when they calve in dry paddocks and are put into irrigation, or are fed high levels of concentrates when they calve. The bacteria in the rumen have to adjust to the new diet, and this may take a fortnight, so that for some time after the change, the digestion processes are not fully efficient. Any major change should be made well before calving so that the interruption is minimised. This can be done by arranging calving on an irrigated paddock, or by starting to feed the concentrate before calving. These steps will also help to improve condition before calving, which is so necessary for high production.

In Brief . . .

The total production of a cow is largely determined by the management she receives before and just after calving. The improvement due to good management is considerable and especially with good animals it is very profitable.

- The cow should finish her lactation in fair condition. Even if she has milked heavily she should be dried off not later than two months before she is due to calve again. A close watch on anticipated calving dates is essential.
- Before calving, the condition of the cow should be progressively improved by access to more or better quality feed. This will ensure that the calf will be well grown, and that the milk-secreting tissues are fully developed and well prepared for the on-coming lactation.
- For at least a fortnight before calving she should be on the feed that the milking herd receives. Sudden changes in the diet at the beginning of lactation should be avoided.
- When the cow calves she should be in excellent condition so that her bodily reserves are high and she can continue to produce a high volume of milk for a considerable time.

Cows prepared in this way will make far better use of the pastures, converting the grass into more milk (which will also be higher in solids-not-fat and butterfat) than cows not so well managed.

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