

# Teamwork the way to the top

Self reliance and teamwork has enabled Graeme (Gimmy) and Sharon Martin to increase their two farms' milk production by 60 percent over the past five years.

Supreme winners in this year's Dairy Business of the Year Competition, as well as winning the low input farming section and the northern North Island award, the couple attribute their Morrinsville farms' profitability to fully feeding their cows while at the same time keeping costs down.

"Sharon and I had budgeted back then on the two farms doing 170,000 kilograms of milksolids (MS) but last year's production was up to 234,000kg MS and this year we will do 270,000 kg MS," he said.

Their cost of production is \$1.69/kg MS less than half the average Waikato cost of \$3.44 and dramatically under the top 10 percent total of \$2.58. Each season he calls in a Dexcel consultant to score their cows to help meet the objective of CS5 for cows near calving time.

A key part of their strategy is to fully utilise grass grown and the two farms appear to be hitting that target with a harvest of 14.4 tonnes of dry matter (DM)/ha, which compares favourably with the top 10 percent of Waikato dairy farms at 14.0t DM/ha and the Waikato average of 12.2t DM/ha.

An augured meal-dispensing system in both herringbone dairies, where stainless steel feeding troughs run the length of each side to allow the cows to feed while being milked, has also boosted milk production and enabled lactation to be extended a month to May 10.

The two herds totalling 580 Friesian cows are fed a mix of dairy meal, copra and palm kernel in the dairy and this season were averaging 470kg MS/cow, which is a big jump on last year's 404kg MS/cow. By comparison, the Waikato average was 358kg MS/cow and the top 10 percent of Waikato farms averaged 388kg MS/cow last season.

Their production/hectare was 1261kg MS, which is 90kg ahead of the regional average but less than the top 10 percent of farms which produce 1398kg MS/ha.

But Graeme, 50, and Sharon,



Sharon, Graeme and Rachelle in one of two dairies with feeding bins and overhead dispensers.

who had a successful career as a midwife before taking on the farms' book-keeping and calf rearing roles, are content to leave their stocking rate at 3.12 cows/ha while many others run 3.5.

They reason that more cows would require extra milking staff and more milking bails in the 20-aside herringbone dairies at Woodlands, now milking 280 cows, and Matuku Road, milking 300.

Other dairy farmers will spend upwards of \$300 for each tonne dry matter (DM) of forage but the Martin farm is spending nothing apart from the cost of running a tractor to pull a 30-year-old Gallagher Silerator.

"People say we don't have to make our own silage but my brother and I work together with our Silerators behind a good modern tractor with front-end loader

unfixable. We do everything in order to keep costs down, so if a sludge pump breaks we have a go at fixing it."

He worked as a mechanic and truck driver before going farming 30 years ago.

"We lay the new concrete or weld broken gates, spread fertiliser and do our own ground work – probably the only help from outside is a drain cleaner and under-sower."

“‘We work hard and we play hard,’ said Sharon, who was tramping to Mt Everest Base Camp with Graeme when he proposed marriage five years ago.”

The Red Sky analysis of their farm performance for the competition showed an operating profit of \$3066/ha for last year, which is well ahead of the Waikato average of \$780/ha and eclipsing the top 10 percent of farms' \$2121/ha.

Their operating profit/cow was a shade under \$1000 – four times the Waikato average.

Cost savings are a key element and a significant saving comes from making their own silage,

and an ordinary farm trailer with a cage for the cut grass," said Graeme.

Last year they cut 100ha over their three farms, usually cutting paddocks 40 days after being grazed to maintain good quality.

"Others rely on contractors but when it rains they get behind," Graeme said.

"We cut our surplus whenever we decide it's a good time and if something breaks it's never

## Silage saving

The silage saving almost offsets the money spent on feed concentrates for the in-dairy troughs, a cost that Graeme sees as worthwhile and manageable.

Graeme and Sharon meet frequently with manager, Sharon's daughter Rachelle. Weekend work is kept to a minimum.

"We work hard and we play hard," said Sharon, who was tramping to the Mt Everest Base Camp with Graeme when he proposed marriage five years ago.

"The weather had been a bit grey until we got to the camp and then the sky cleared. It was a perfect day, perfect timing," said Graeme.

The Martins are now considering a further land investment to keep their business growing. **D**