

# White Face Advantage utilised by Canterbury Sharemilkers

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Using Herefords to follow up AI isn't a focus of every dairy farmer; but for sharemilkers Rob and Debbie Mackle it's a highlight of their business and they wouldn't be using any other breed.

Rob has a strong preference for the breed and says they will continue to play a key role on the farm.

"I like to have good looking animals on the farm and the Hereford is definitely easy on the eye."

Rob and Debbie are 50:50 sharemilkers for Graham Brooker on Thompsons Track near Ashburton. The farm is 140ha, and in eight years, with Rob and Debbie at the helm, production has lifted from 1200 to 1800kgMSha. They milk 550 cows at a stocking rate of 3.8 - 4cows/ha.

The contributing factors to this increase have been a rigorous regrassing programme and high feed utilisation. The Mackles grow approximately 18t/DM/ha/year, 90% of which is utilised. All new pastures have been direct drilled with typical sowing rates of 24kg/ha ryegrass and 3kg/ha white clover. Pastures are predominantly Trojan and older varieties such as Samson and Bronson.

Rob and Debbie say they are not big users of Nitrogen, applying approximately 200kg/N/ha/year as urea and using a "little and often" strategy. They have added herbage testing for the past two years to their soil testing programme to identify weaker paddocks.

Wintering is all on a neighbouring property on rape, kale and straw. Young stock are grazed off farm until calving and another neighbour supplies grain.

The farm is fully irrigated with 60ha under centre pivot, 40ha of border dyke and 40ha of long lateral sprinklers.

## Breed a benefit for Award Winning Sharemilkers

Rob and Debbie will be familiar to some in the rural community. In 2011 they won the Canterbury/North Otago Sharemilker of the Year title and placed third nationally. This year they are convening the Canterbury/North Otago competition.

The Mackles also found themselves in the media spotlight for Rob's rescue work in Christchurch after the February 22nd earthquake. Rob downed tools and drove into town to see if he could help. He spent many hours working inside the collapsed Pyne Gould Corporation building.

One thing that hasn't landed them in the news, until now, is Rob and Debbie's use of Hereford bulls, but it is obvious that it is an aspect of their business they particularly enjoy.

After leaving school Rob mustered on high country around the South Island, including Muzzle Station. He has spent time with numerous sheep and beef breeds including stints working with Simmental and Romney studs.

Despite loving that work Rob was involved with the live export of crayfish to Japan in Kaikoura before going lower order sharemilking on the West Coast. The couple spent a further three years managing and three years as 50:50 sharemilkers in Mid-Canterbury before arriving at the current property.

"Rob's a beef man and that's where his passion lies; with beef stock," says Debbie and for the entire time the Mackles have been farming under their own steam they have used Herefords.

Most importantly for the couple, the Hereford cross calves are easy



to identify when they hit the ground, because of the predominately white face they leave when crossed ensuring 100% pure reliability for them with no risk of mix ups. Rob points out that Angus calves for example are more difficult to identify.

The second major benefit of Herefords for the Mackles is their easy nature and good temperament explains Rob.

“Knowing they are placid with staff who have less stock experience is important to us; a toey bull would become dangerous with inexperienced staff. I’ve worked with many types of beef stock and found Herefords to be the most placid. We’ve never had any problems.”

Debbie is responsible for calf rearing which she has down to a fine art. She agrees Herefords have been a good choice from her time in the calf shed.

“One benefit of quiet bulls is quiet progeny.”

Rob and Debbie sell about 150 of the white face calves a year and say they can’t meet demand. Private buyers that first took the calves eight years ago are still coming back.

Debbie explains that the key to successful calf rearing lies in plenty of colostrum and keeping them “warm and dry and very well pampered.”

Debbie believes transporting calves at four days old places them under too much stress and that by 10 days calves are usually starting to bloom. She says that the Hereford cross calves hit the ground running and are very well grown by two weeks of age when they are sold.

“We don’t sell anything we don’t believe will perform.”

Bull selling season is a chance for Rob to use his stockmanship and selection skills he has honed over the years and it is obvious that despite being busy at that time of year bull buying is an event he looks forward to.

*One major benefit of Herefords for the Mackles is their temperament which is especially important with inexperienced staff.*

“It’s very important to know what you want at auction,” says Rob. “We like to know bulls are fit and well-handled and that they know what an electric fence is.”

He generally targets the first 30 sale bulls and makes sure he walks among them, checking them for soundness, conformation, testicle size and markings which are important for calf identification on the dairy farm.

He also checks there are no TB issues and that bulls have been vaccinated for BVD and leptospirosis.

Rob checks off more bulls than he requires and always has a few second picks up his sleeve in case he misses out on his first choices.

Calving ease is another key aspect of the selection criteria explains Debbie because Rob is the only person who checks the cows at calving time. 600 cows calve and after all the AI calves have dropped, the last thing Rob wants to be doing is pulling big calves.

Rob prefers bulls with a short gestation length EBV and says that calving ease also helps cows get in calf the following season.

After auction Rob always uses a reputable transport firm so he knows his purchases are handled well on their journey to Ashburton.

Rob and Debbie had been buying bulls from Haldon Station until two years ago when they decided to support registered Hereford breeders John and Liz McKerchar who were sponsoring the Sharemilker of the Year Competition. Rob says both breeders have been good to them and they will likely buy bulls from each from 2013 on.

“It’s Important to have a good relationship with the breeders and John and Liz (Shrimpton’s Hill Herefords) and Paddy (Boyd) at Haldon, have certainly added value to our business. We get treated very well.”

Rob goes on to say that while some dairy farmers struggle with investing too greatly in quality bulls, he believes it is wise and easily







*Rob and Debbie Mackle are sharemilkers and advocates for the Hereford breed, which they say will continue to play a key role in their business.*

justified spending, partly because with Herefords he knows with certainty when the AI calving has finished.

“We don’t mind paying for quality bulls because I don’t believe a bull on a dairy farm costs you any money. You get your cows in calf, you get half the bull’s value back when they go to the works and you get calves worth good money so I don’t get hung up on the price of bulls.”

Despite the enjoyment Rob gets from the bulls he buys, they only stay on the farm for a short time and are only used as two year olds.

“We rotate bulls every two days through the busy first three weeks, while they are working hard, to give them a spell. They are all put together to back-up the AI synchronised programme and they remain together for the quiet weeks. The bulls are only here from October until mid-February then they’re straight on the truck”.

Rob says in addition to the fact that the bulls more than pay for themselves, two year old bulls are the right size for the Mackles’ moderately framed Friesian herd. He also says that bulls tend to grow temperamental as they get older and doesn’t believe that grazing bulls off farm is a necessary or justifiable option for them.

The Mackles have resisted the temptations of a larger dairy herd and despite their ultimate goal of eventual farm ownership have remained longer in their current role than they initially expected they would.

Their four children; Livvy, Kate, Sammie and Alex are aged between seven and 20 and Debbie points out that there has to be a balance

between the herd and family life. The smaller herd means Rob can look at the whole business in a day and achieve that desired balance.

The Mackles are happy on the current farm and while they admit to always exploring opportunities nothing has been able to entice them away yet.

“We’re with an amazing farm owner here and it works very well for both parties.”

Considering the ability to manage enduring relationships with several neighbouring graziers, the farm owner, their bull sellers and a range of people within their community and industry, Rob and Debbie clearly value strong partnerships, a trait that continues to serve them well in their farming careers. H

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