

NewsWatch

Kestells develop top Holstein herd

By FRAN O'LEARY

TOM Kestell grew up on a dairy farm near Waldo in Sheboygan County. His parents, Melroy and Helen, had 13 children. After graduating from Plymouth High School, Tom enrolled at the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point where he majored in political science with plans to go to law school.

In 1970, just 15 credits shy of graduation, "I decided sitting behind a desk all day and working in an office was not for me," Tom says.

He returned to the home farm and in 1971 purchased 30 cows and the machinery from his mother and rented her farm. In 1973, Tom married Gin, who he met at Stevens Point, and they began their journey together. Two years later, an abandoned farm was offered at public auction near the home farm, and they purchased it.

"The buildings needed a lot of work," Tom recalls. "The original part of the barn was built in 1850. We added onto the barn twice, and we heavily remodeled the house. There was nothing here that worked."

Once the new farm was up and running with 85 cows, they bought the home farm. That was in 1979. Additional tracts of land were purchased when they became available. Upgrading their buildings and improving animal comfort became two of Tom's priorities over the years. In addition to adding on to and re-

Key Points

- Tom Kestell is top exporter of Holstein embryos in state.
- Their rolling herd average is 41,274 pounds of milk.
- They earn 75% of their farm income from sale of genetics.

modeling the tiestall barn, where the cows are housed and milked, additional housing for dry cows and young stock was added. They also built a new milk house, office area, a machine shed, shop, feed storage (including several silos), a Slurrystore and a lagoon.

"These improvements not only make the farm look nicer, but the cattle are more comfortable, and so are we," Tom says.

Today, Tom and Gin and their son Chris and his wife, Jennifer, milk 130 registered Holstein cows and farm 600 owned and rented acres that make up Ever-Green-View Farms. Their rolling herd average is 3x 41,274 milk, 1,682 butterfat and 1,297 protein, ranking them as the top-producing AgSource herd for combined fat and protein in the state. Their Holsteins' breed age average is 110.9%, making their herd No. 1 in the nation for type with herds of 115 cows or more.

Top cows

In 2009, Ever-Green-View My 1326-ET, a 4-year-old cow, set a world production record of 72,190 pounds of milk. My 1326 is 10 years old today and still in the herd, and her record still stands.



FAMILY FARM: Tom Kestell (right) and his wife, Gin, (second from left) are forming an LLC with their son Chris (left) and his wife, Jennifer (second from right).

"She attracts a lot of interest to our breeding program and to our cow families. Many people come here to see her," Tom says.

During the past year, two more world milk records were set — one for junior 2-year-olds and the other for junior 3-year-olds.

"This was a dam-daughter pair and a feat that has never been done before," Tom says.

While their milk production is impressive, Tom says, "Milk is a byproduct of our business. Embryos are our main focus, but milk production is very important. We have to have milk records on our cows to sell their genetics. Seventy-five percent of our farm income comes from the sale of genetics."

In addition to their 130 Holstein cows, they also have 300 heifers and 100 bulls. The Kestells' young stock is housed in 11 greenhouses designed and built by the family team.

"We calve in a total of 250 cows and heifers each year," Tom explains. "We sell 300 head of cattle per year — 200 cows and heifers and about 100 bulls."

Exporting genetics

They currently have many bulls in AI studs. A bull they bred and sold to Europe named Snowman is the No. 1 milk and No. 1 protein bull in the world.

In 2014, the Kestells sold 2,600 embryos to foreign countries and another 200 embryos in the U.S.

Tom is quick to point out, "We didn't do this overnight; it took a lot of years and hard work."

The Kestells began selling em-

bryos from the herd in the 1980s.

They started by selling a few embryos each year, but their business quickly grew as they began exporting to many countries. By the late 1980s, embryo transfer and exporting genetics became a huge part of their business.

"In order to promote our genetics, we have hosted thousands of foreign visitors to our farm," Tom explains. "We have also traveled extensively to visit the customers of our genetics and to promote registered Holsteins around the world."

Last year, the Kestells sold 1,300 embryos to Vaganovo Farms in Russia. "Vaganovo Farms has a herd of 1,300 cows in Siberia," Tom says. "We have a joint venture embryo facility in Siberia with them."

Their goal is to develop their herd to be the epicenter of genetics in their area. Tom currently has two ET vets working for him in Russia transferring embryos from his farm to recipient animals in Russia. They also have a herdsman, Bob Zeamer, from DePere, who is acting as a liaison and herdsman with Vaganovo Farms. Tom spends a lot of time helping to manage this farm in Siberia. He visited there twice with his local vet and nutritionist.

Tom also spends time working on plans to improve the overall management and performance of this farm. During one of his visits, Tom met with the Russian secretary of agriculture and also the governor for that region.

For their export efforts, the Kestells have been awarded the

Governor's Export Award twice. They are the only farm to receive this award twice.

The Kestells grow all the feed needed for their herd, including corn, wheat, soybeans and alfalfa. They also sell some surplus crops to neighbors. Last fall, Tom and Chris were honored to win the dairy hay division at the World Dairy Expo Forage Superbowl. Tom came in first, and Chris came in second.

"We have won the contest two out of the past three years and placed second the other year," Tom says.

Tom received the Wisconsin Holstein Distinguished Breeder Award. They have also had dozens of cows win Wisconsin Top Performer awards. The family has also been honored by Holstein USA with 23 Progressive Genetics awards, 14 Progressive Breeder awards and three Herd of Excellence awards.

In 2000, the Kestells were named Farm Family of the Year by the Wisconsin Department of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection.

Tom and Gin are forming an LLC with Chris and Jennifer so they can transition the farm to the next generation. Chris and Jennifer's first child is due in March. Tom and Gin's oldest son, Joel, and his wife, Julie, have a successful dairy farm near Mount Calvary and have one 3-year-old son, Ethan. A third son, Clay, was lost in a cycle accident in 1998. The family has awarded more than 20 scholarships to area students to honor Clay's memory.

2015 MASTER AGRICULTURIST

Tom Kestell
Sheboygan County



Age: 66

Location: Waldo, Sheboygan County

Farming enterprises: Registered Holsteins, crops

Size of farm: 425 acres owned, 180 acres rented, 130 cows, 300 heifers, 100 bulls

Years farming: 43

Family: Wife Gin, two sons, two daughters-in-law, one grandson, one grandchild due in March