

DAIRY

August 2021

Why August wins championships

Edited by
Joe Patton,
Dairy Specialist

It's often said that championship wins are forged in January when training begins on the dark, cold and wet nights. The preparation reaps reward in the late summer and early autumn. The opposite is true for grazing. The grazing championship begins in August with the planning and building up of grass while growth rates are still strong. This is the first piece of the autumn grazing management challenge.

What is the prize? For 100 cows it's €200 for every extra day at grass. You can have more days at grass if you follow the targets and have a plan. Guideline average farm cover (AFC)

targets for autumn grazing are summarised in **Table 1**. These targets are a good guide and will work for most farms. However, measuring on PastureBase and completing an autumn budget are much more accurate. The level of grass to build will depend on farm stocking rate and potential to grow grass in the autumn. Farmers with heavy soils should target a maximum of 900-1,000kg DM/ha, as heavy covers are harder to graze during wet weather. After mid September, farms should hold this AFC until they begin closing off the farm. Farmers have full control of stocking rate and demand on their farm. You can reduce demand

by: removing culls or young stock; bringing ground back in for grazing; and, introducing silage into the diet. Feeding extra meal usually is not enough to build covers for a lot of farms. Speak to your Teagasc advisor who will help you build a detailed plan.

Table 1: Target AFC to meet the autumn grazing targets.

Date (kg DM/ha)	2.5LU/ha	3.0LU/ha	3.5LU/ha	Rotation length (days)
Early August	600	600	600	21
Mid August	700	800	850	25
Early September	800	900	1,000	30
Mid September	1,000-1,100	1,100-1,200	1,200	35

A good time to review your work routine

This month is usually the time for having a well-earned break from the busy operation of the farm. Taking some time off is its own reward, but is also very important for work efficiency, because it allows for a renewal of energy and enthusiasm as autumn approaches. Use this quieter period to review work practices with the objective of identifying areas for improved efficiencies. Some common areas to be looked at are:

- evening milking time is the key to sorting out the working day on many dairy farms – an eight-hour interval (e.g., 7am to 3pm) will not reduce milk yield – extra jobs can be done after milking on certain days if needed, so try it for the autumn;
- use contractors to empty slurry tanks in good

time before the closing period – this will benefit nutrient-use efficiency and reduce pressure on capacity – the net cost is small overall;

- service machinery and repair yard infrastructure – good facilities and equipment improve the working environment and are vital for farm safety – make a list of priority jobs and assign a time to get each done;
- paperwork and compliance take up a lot of time – investigate ways of making these tasks easier using technology, for example; and,
- plan ahead for the peak work period next spring by reviewing last spring's experience. Was calf health an issue due to accommodation? Was cow health a problem? Did the herd get to grass as planned? Identify the 'choke-points' and make a plan to address them in the coming weeks.

HEALTH & SAFETY

Beware of moving machinery

August is harvest month and a lot of machinery is moving on farms and public roads, including trailers, balers and silage gear. Movement brings danger, particularly to bystanders, including children and older farmers. A vehicle travelling at walking speed (5km/hour) travels 1.4 metres per second. Being struck gives a bystander little chance due to the impact force. In August, a lot of powered



Stay out of crush zones.

machines are used so make sure moving parts are guarded. This applies particularly to machines used in a stationary position, like augers and slurry vacuum tanker drive shafts. Entanglement in a moving machine part leads to horrific injuries. Also be aware of the dangers of livestock, particularly bulls at the end of the breeding season and autumn-calving cows with calves at foot.



Costs and solutions to lameness issues

The cost of dairy cow lameness could be up to €300 per case, not to mention reduced animal welfare and the hassle factor of lame cows. Work carried out by Moorepark showed a lameness rate of 4% in spring and over 7% in autumn, but with a large range across herds. Cows with problems in the spring were 10 times more likely to re-appear as lame in the autumn.

The main lameness causes for a grazing herd are mechanical, e.g., bruising, white line disease, ulcers, as opposed to infectious, e.g., Mortellaro, foul in the foot. The priorities are therefore related to surfaces and managing cow flow around milking times. Now is a good time to address issues on the farm before we move into the highest risk time of year. Here are some things to implement.

- **Problem spots** – seemingly small problem areas like standing water, poorly drained corners, broken surfaces, shading by overgrown trees, etc., can cause major lameness problems. Identify and fix these as a first step.
- **Road surfaces** – are they in good enough condition? Small pebbles and grit are the main cause of white line disease. If this is being seen at hoof trimming, then there is an issue to be fixed. Surfaces should be smooth and finished with a well-compacted surface material. Take an hour or two to walk farm roads and note the quality of the surface, getting a second opinion if possible.
- **Interface area** – the step from roadway to concrete can often be a cause of lameness due to pebbles being dragged onto the hard surface. Laying 8-10m of a material like astro-turf at yard or tunnel entries/exits has worked very well for many farms.
- **Road verges** – a common problem is build-up of grass/sods along the road over time, which impedes drainage. Remove these or at least break regular openings to provide drainage
- **Cow flow in and out of the parlour** – are there simple modifications that could be made, e.g., remove sharp turns, provide matting on narrow parlour exits? Check the size of the collecting yard – providing more than 1.5m² per cow reduces stress on cows' feet.
- **Hoof trimming** – lameness is a repeat-offender problem. All cows that were treated during spring or have a previous history should be drafted for selective trimming before mid August. Check all cows for rear hoof condition at milking – trim overgrown digits before clinical lameness emerges.
- **Foot bath** – for infectious disease control where identified. Follow a clear protocol for product use and schedule of treatments. Poorly done foot-bathing is worse than no foot-bathing at all.



Address lameness issues and keep hooves healthy.

SignPost – climate actions for August



Extra days at grass will result in less silage in the diet.



Have your slurry tanks emptied now.

1. August is a good month to sort grazing infrastructure to increase days at grass, if your capital expenditure budgets allow. Solutions include spur roadways, multiple access points to paddocks and back fencing.
2. Extra grazing days in the autumn are achieved by building grass cover during August. Extra days at grass will result in less silage in the diet, reduced methane emissions and slurry volumes.
3. Spread 20-25kg nitrogen (N)/ha using protected urea in the last two weeks of August when you get the best response in grass growth. Matching N application to grass growth optimises the efficiency of N and reduces greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions.
4. Empty your slurry tanks. This reduces the risk of storage issues over the winter where storage is an issue, allowing you to optimise the value of this nutrient in spring.
5. If feeding ration with grass only – feed maximum 14% crude protein (CP) for dairy cows. Less excess protein in the diet means less N excreted and less GHG emissions.
6. Check milk recording and bulk herd health screening reports for issues that need to be resolved. A healthy herd means increased animal performance, reduced replacement rate and lower GHG emissions.