

Attention to detail drives earlier finishing



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Securing your Future

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How to lower finishing age will be a key topic at the Teagasc Grange Open Day, writes Teagasc Beef Specialist **Catherine Egan**



Background

The farmer

Dara Walton operates a suckler and dairy-calf-to-beef enterprise in Cappagh, Co Tipperary. He is a full-time farmer and finishes his steers and heifers at 22 months.

The researcher

Paul Smith is a research officer at Teagasc Grange. He is developing strategies to reduce enteric methane emissions from ruminants via breeding, nutrition, and improving calf health.

The advisor

Terry Carroll, Teagasc Kilkenny, has worked with Dara over many years focusing on the key areas of nutrition, animal health, genetics and grassland management.



Paul Smith and Dara Walton.

Dara Walton, his wife Muireann and children Eloise(4) and Tom (2), have a suckler herd with 60 cows calving from the end of January to mid-April. Some of the cattle are sold as stores; the majority are finished as steers.

Heifers are kept as replacements or finished on farm. Dara also purchases 60 dairy beef calves from his brother Pat and these are finished as steers and heifers.

Dara notes that the first cow calved on January 20th and the last in mid-April. "I would like to knock a month

off that and will have to get disciplined and pull the bull," he says.

He does his own AI with 50 calves this year out of 63 born from AI. There were 46 calves born by March 1st.

Base cow

"I have a base cow of a Simmental cross Limousin, so I pick maternal Limousin sires with good terminal traits and milk figures, but they have to be balanced, as there is 50% chance of the calf being a bull. The more terminal type cows like the

Charolais cross Simmental type would get a Charolais straw. I won't use a bull with over 10% calving difficulty," says Dara, who lives 13km from the farm.

"I don't want to be getting up at all hours of the morning to come over to pull a calf. On average two calves are born every day. This year I had to jack about five calves, all the Charolais calved themselves."

Researcher Paul Smith observes: "If we look at finishing age relative to when a calf is born, the earlier born calf is getting away a lot earlier."



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With a mean calving date of mid-February, Dara is already on the right path."

Terry added: "Dara has great flexibility when he does his own AI to be able to pick difference sires and match certain cows to particular bulls."

"I calve heifers at 24 months. I have changed what I'm doing this year. I am putting them in calf to an Angus this year and as they haven't been out with the weather, I will scan them and synchronise them," says Dara.

"I did the AI course and this is my third year doing it. I work at my own ease and there is no pressure trying to get in a cow with a reel. I bring them in and AI them and they go back out again."

Animal Health

"I shave their backs and tails and every one of them use the cubicles. They are spotless, so when the calf is sucking, the udder is clean. Since I put cows on cubicles the incidence of scours on the farm has gone way down," says Dara.

"The weanlings are vaccinated with Bovipast. They get the initial shot followed by the booster. They are also vaccinated for IBR. All calves are treated to prevent coccidiosis.

"Once the whole group of cows are together I vaccinate to prevent clostridial diseases. Cows are also vaccinated for leptospirosis, salmonella and IBR. I have a closed herd here apart from the calves that are sourced from my brother's herd, he also has a closed herd. The calves I buy in are only vaccinated for IBR."

Terry Carroll adds: "All stock are dosed for fluke at housing and as the Beef Health Check Report is coming back clear, that shows that the protocol is working."

Nutrition

When Dara's suckler-bred calves were weighed at weaning, they averaged 320-340kg. The average daily gain of the bulls was 1.3kg/head/day while the heifers achieved 1.1 kg/head/day. The aim is to keep that going on grass over the second summer with every animal on the farm gaining 1kg/head/day.

"It's up to me to keep the grass right, keeping them moved on in the paddocks. I'm regularly weighing stock and if they are not performing I investigate why. Do they need a dose maybe? Is the grassland good enough?



Advisor Terry Carroll and Dara Walton.

"I might have 30 acres closed for silage but only cut seven acres when it is ready. I cut it at the leafy stage, 7-8 bales to the acre," he says.

Silage is tested for quality, notes Paul Smith: "Once housed you would like to be putting 0.6kg/day on them over the winter but that does not always materialise. They have done very well this winter."

Dara adds: "I have all the bales numbered from each of the paddocks be it number 1, 2, 3 or 25, so I know what's in each of them. This winter they were getting around 74 DMD silage and a kilo and a half of ration to the weanlings."

By testing all the bales, Dara is able to keep the feeding consistent throughout the winter. "Before going to grass, the target is to have them at 400kg which means they are right on target," adds Paul Smith.

"Dry cows get 65 DMD silage. My cows are naturally very fleshy when they come in and I need to take 50-60 kg off them. Feeding poorer silage keeps condition off them. I have enough feeding space, so the result is the cows are fit and the calves are smaller."

In September, stores are weighed, drafted at 530kg and above and housed according to weight. Over the last 100 days they are fed 74 DMD

silage along with 3kg/day of meal for the first month and built up to 5 kg/day and fed 7-8kg/day for the last month before being finished.

The lighter steers are housed in October and built up on the same feeding for the last 100 days. The heifers are all housed in September and fed 3kg/day of meal for the first month and built up to 4-5 kg/day and finished in around 90 days.

Grassland management

"There are 105 acres here in one block and I have 30 acres leased," says Dara. "The farm is set up in paddocks with troughs placed so that I can divide paddocks any way I want. I always use a back fence to protect the regrowth."

Terry adds: "Dara operates a two day paddock system which is enhancing the sward quality, increasing daily live weight gain and giving more control of grazing management. The fact the calves can creep graze in front of the cows is a big benefit to them."

Grass mixtures for reseeding on the farm consist of 60% tetraploid and 40% diploid and 2 kg of clover.

As a full-time farmer, Dara has to be efficient. "In the past, I worked selling grass seed and clover. It clued me in to reseeding. In the past I was

sowing clover for protein and carcass gain whereas now I am reducing my nitrogen input on the farm.

"I am measuring grass and targeting grazing covers of around 1,400-1,500kg DM. I can come in and take out covers if they go too strong as I make all bales and don't have a pit. Last year the continental steers that I finished ranged from 360kg-430kg carcass with an average carcass of 390kg at 22 months. While the heifers averaged 350kg carcass at 22 months. The dairy beef steers would have been finished at 315kg carcass on average at 22 months," adds Dara.

"I weigh all the cattle when drafting for finishing. In the crush I can put a hand on them and I know their weight, I know what they will kill out.

"This avoids letting any cattle go that may be too light, for the sake of another three weeks, to ensure you get all the value in them that's available."

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The Verdict: 'Walton farm's performance is comparable with Teagasc Grange'

"What's being achieved here on Dara's farm with both groups of stock is comparable to Teagasc Grange," says Paul Smith. "The average finishing age of Dara's steers and heifers is five to six months younger, but with a similar carcass weight, to that of the national average in 2023, for a similar animal type.

"The level of animal performance Dara is achieving highlights the benefits that optimal on-farm technical efficiency can have on the finishing age of beef cattle, with minimal impact to carcass weight. Indeed, the optimisation of animal nutrition, genetics and health, is applicable across all beef production systems, and can play a key role in improving live weight gain and reducing finishing age.

In addition, the reduction in finishing age can improve farm profitability by reducing input costs. All of these factors will be discussed at the BEEF 2024 open day.

"The big research question at the moment is 'Why there is such variation in performance in the national herd average in comparison to grass-based research, and high-performing commercial, farms'. The *Beef-Quest* project, recently funded by the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine, will aim to address these knowledge gaps, with plans for the research project presented at the open day."



Dara, Paul and Terry with the suckler herd.



Knowledge grows



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*Reference: DEFRA NT2605 & FORRESTAL et al. 2016



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