

La Revue Holstein Québec

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Switching to robotic milking

Good planning guarantees success!

Ferme Counard

Longevity, efficiency, and teamwork!

Ferme Roquet

Inspired by the next generation!





BY
VÉRONIQUE
LEMONDE

Editor in
Chief



Beauce Holstein Club Astounding results for amazing producers!

Founded in 1964, the Beauce Holstein Club has 290 members throughout the counties of Bellechasse, Compton, Dorchester and Mégantic. This exemplary dairy and entrepreneurial region of Quebec is home to many outstanding Holstein herds, including Master Breeder herds Beauçoise, Filiale, Lacolline, Lehoux, Lison, Sartigan and Rodveil.

A recent example of achievement is Ferme Bergitte (Bertrand Boutin et fils inc.), in Saint-Georges, with a fifth-place ranking in Quebec for BCA. The farm also won a number of trophies and nominations at the last Holstein Québec awards event, including third place for the new Balance Trophy, and is ranked among the top 100 LPI herds. This in addition to the Canadian Champion award for 8-year-old Bergitte Facebook Halena, VG, for fat and total performance. Ferme Bergitte is also breeders and owners of three Canadian champions for production in as many years.

“Too, Les Fermes Turmel (Beauçoise prefix) ranks among the top 20 BCA herds in Quebec. The herd also tops the LPI and Pro\$ herd lists in the Beauce, and ranks fifth among the top TPI herds in Quebec. Producers like Martin and Renaud Boutin (Sartigan prefix) have been finalists for milk quality, ranked fourth



Stacey Bourque, of Ferme SS Kennebec, is chair of the AJRQ.



Bergitte Facebook Halena, VG, owned by Bertrand Boutin et fils inc., was named 8-year-old Canadian Champion for fat and total performance in 2021. At 8 years and 10 months, Halena recorded a 305-day yield of 25 762 kg, with 5.5% fat and 3.1% protein.

for TPI in Quebec, fourth for the Balance Trophy, and are the breeders and exhibitors of the Grand Champion at the Beauce show this summer, namely, Sartigan Abbott Ringuette, EX-91 2E,” says Beauce Holstein Club’s publicist Marie-Christine Leclerc, with a hint of pride in her voice. Another cow to watch out for is Karona Shottle Flash, EX-92 4E 9*, a finalist in Holstein Canada’s Cow of the Year competition.

In recent news, Étienne and Guillaume Lesard, of Ferme Holdream, in Saint-Honoré-de-Shenley, became the Quebec finalists in Canada’s Outstanding Young Farmers Program, another major achievement for the region. The Club’s younger generation is taking its place as well, with Stacey Bourque, of Ferme SS Kennebec, now chair of the AJRQ. There’s no shortage of energy in the Beauce Holstein Club!



Ferme Buroco hosted the 2017 Holstein Québec Picnic, in Beauceville.

A long history of success!

In 1990, Ferme Roquet hosted the Holstein Québec Picnic in Saint-Côme-Linière. The event returned to the region in 2017, this time at Ferme Buroco Holstein, in Beauceville. A golf tournament and dinner were also organized on that occasion in support of the Audrey-Lehoux Foundation, which offers bursaries to young agricultural students.

The legendary Master Breeder herds of the Beauce Holstein Club include Du Chevreuil (1988), Beauçoise (1996 and 2011), Lehoux (2000 and 2019), Sartigan (2009), Lison (2012), Filiale (2013), Lacolline (2013) and Rodveil (2018).

Out and about and having fun!

With its reputation as a club that likes to have fun, the organisation is celebrating the 25th anniversary of its popular calendar this year. The Club has long been coordinating trips, farm visits and open barn days, in addition to its annual corn roast at the Beauce fair, awards gala in November, and barn party at Christmas. At the AGM each November, the Club always tries to have a speaker on the roster.

The Club even organized a virtual visit during the pandemic, in 2021, giving members an online tour of the facilities at Ferme Jacobs. With a little ingenuity, the Club managed to maintain ties among its membership despite the context of social distancing.

Last January, the Club invited its members to Ferme Va-Ber, in Saint-Joseph-de-Beauce, to visit the farm's new barn with three robotic milkers—an event appreciated by all! With its programme of engaging activities and a dynamic membership of hardy and talented producers, the Beauce Holstein Club will continue to surprise!

The Club's board of directors is composed of president Éric Bélanger (Belan), vice-president Kristelle Loignon (Kristault), second vice-president Steve Grenier (Lison), directors Michel Breton (Bremiro), Dany Chabot, Maxime Poulin (Jeanlu), Maxime Boutin (Sartigan), Marie-Christine Leclerc (Bergitte), also the Club's publicist, and Lucie Lamontagne (Va-Ber), as well as secretary-treasurer Krystel Giguère (Jonction).



One of the many conferences organized by the Beauce Holstein Club.

A famous pioneer!

Chair of the Audrey-Lehoux Foundation, Germain Lehoux is a well-know figure in the agricultural world, and even more so in the Beauce! Actively involved in many of the region's agricultural organizations, Mr. Lehoux also owns the high-calibre operation Ferme Lehoux with his brother Richard and their respective partners, and now his daughter as well. The farm pioneered the use of embryo transfers in the 1980s. Mr. Lehoux was also president of Holstein Canada in 2009. In November 2021, the Beauce Holstein Club inducted Germain Lehoux into its Hall of Fame.



Well done!

BY
VÉRONIQUE
LEMONDE

Editor in
Chief



Ferme Counard Longevity, efficiency, and teamwork!

Ferme Counard, in Saint-Éphrem-de-Beauce, is the core of an entity that includes three other businesses; it is also the pride and joy of a close-knit family that encourages teamwork, fun, longevity, and efficiency. At Ferme Counard, family members and employees alike have an important role to play, taking on responsibilities consistent with their strengths.

A third-generation farm, Ferme Counard makes room for the younger generation as well, with Marie-Pier now a shareholder with her parents. "Both my children wanted a place in the business, and that's normal," says their father, Mathieu Couture. "In 2014, we decided to purchase another milk quota, Ferme Filcote, owned by my son Félix."

With 140 Holstein cows housed in a cow barn built in 2017 and equipped with 3 Lely A4 milking robots, Ferme Counard produces 185 kg of butterfat per day. The operation's 6-row-wide facility is immaculate, boasting deep stalls, bed pack areas for close-up cows, natural ventilation, and lime and straw bedding. In April 2018, the Couture family opened its doors to give visitors a chance to see their new robotic outfit.

The old tie-stall barn on the Counard farm now houses Ferme Filcote's 95-cow herd, which produces 130 kg of quota, with three milkings a day.

Everyone involved in the Counard operation has their specific area of expertise. Armed with a Farm Management diploma from the ITA and a bachelor of science in Agronomy, Félix is responsible for the herd. Marie-Pier, who also completed a diploma



Félix Couture and his sister, Marie-Pier Couture.

in Farm Management, mainly takes care of administration for the different operations and manages the replacement heifers. Her partner, Jean-Sébastien Bédard, a civil engineering technician, sees primarily to projects and supply management. Patrick Busque, a valuable employee at Ferme Counard for more than 15 years now, manages the

fields, and two Guatemalan workers complete the team. Mathieu Couture is the man of experience at Ferme Counard, with 11 years as an administrator at Sollio, with his wife, Danielle, also assuming a very important role in communication within the team.



The facilities at Ferme Counard are equipped with a natural ventilation system.



HERD PROFILE



Animals for free-stall housing

From the cold nursery with positive ventilation—a rather unique model in Quebec, imported from Wisconsin—to the automatic milking system, Ferme Counard selects its animals with a focus on open housing. “When we built our new free-stall barn in 2017, we agreed that we would need well-balanced cows, suited to loose housing. We try to view the cows as a group, rather than individually. So we’ve worked towards uniformity in our genetic selection,” Félix Couture explains. For example, the farm bought a number of cows from Ferme Bergeroy when starting up their new facility, looking for good mobility and good teat placement for robotic milking. Many other cows were acquired in the United States.

Comfortable calves!

Because the calves at Ferme Counard are reared in a cold nursery with positive pressure ventilation, conserving their body heat is crucial. To that end, it is important to provide sufficient straw to cover the calves’ legs, what is known as the nesting score, a principle developed by professor Ken Nordlund, at the University of Wisconsin. Note that temperatures in Wisconsin are very similar to those in Quebec. Calves actually do very well at low temperatures. Their enemy is the humidity, not the cold. Straw acts as a blanket, keeping calves warm.

“All of a sudden, we had to produce 100 kg/day more. We were losing our points of reference since in barely a year we had to rebuild a farm and get accustomed to robotic milking. Right now our cows are visiting the robots an average of 2.8 times per day, so milking speed is a major selection criteria for our animals,” adds Mathieu Couture.

Ferme Counard

HERD: 165 head, including 140 lactating cows (120 replacement heifers)

PRODUCTION: 38 litres of milk per cow per day, with 4.1% fat and 3.25% protein

CLASSIFICATION: 22 VG – 40 GP

QUOTA: 182 kg BF/day

CROPS: The farm cultivates 1200 acres under the name Agricouture, a division of the Équipe Counard entity devoted to the crop sector. The cows in the Counard herd are fed a TMR composed of corn silage and hay stored in Ag-Bags, grain grown on the farm (rye, wheat ...), soybeans, and minerals. At the milking robots, the cows receive four types of cubed feed.

“With robotic milking, we have to change our approach a bit. We were used to managing the cows one at a time, and that’s not how it works any more. But I think the feeling of being close to the cows is still there. It’s just that we don’t necessarily have a favourite, we like all the cows more or less equally,” concludes Félix Couture with a smile.



A gathering of the Couture family. There is something here for everyone, and everyone has a role in the operation. Together they strive to ensure the success of the family businesses and increase their margins as much as possible.

BY
ALYCIA
CHABOT

Advisor
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Ferme SS Kennebec Determination transmitted from generation to generation!

The county of Beauce-Sartigan, in the Chaudière-Appalaches region, is where this close-knit family pulls together to develop their herd of exceptional animals. At Ferme SS Kennebec, the spotlight is on the art of robotic milking and the countless projects that have contributed to the operation's renown in the dairy world.

Ferme SS Kennebec (KENNEBEC)

OWNERS:

Sylvain Bourque and Sonia Paquet

Les élevages Kennebec : Sylvain Bourque, Stacey Bourque and Laurie Bourque

HERD: 120 head, including 60 lactating cows

QUOTA: 70 kg BF/day

AVERAGE ANNUAL PRODUCTION PER COW: 10 854 kg, 4.4% F and 3.34% P

CLASSIFICATION: 2 EX, 36 VG, 19 GP

BCA: 235-274-247



In 2022, the Kennebec herd won both the Premier Breeder and Premier Exhibitor banners at the Beauce agricultural show.

18 years of projects!

The story of the Kennebec prefix began 18 years ago, when Sylvain Bourque and Sonia Paquet were looking for a place to house their horses. They bought an old dairy barn as well as others agricultural buildings in Saint-Théophile, in the Beauce. But because there weren't enough horses to keep the barn warm in winter, the couple decided to acquire some beef cattle. Wanting to expand her knowledge of agriculture, Sonia then went back to school, first enrolling in the beef cattle production program and then completing the dairy production program.

Six years later, the couple took steps to acquire 12 kg of quota in addition to another 12 kg, payable over 10 years, for a total quota of 24 kg. The following year, they renovated the barn top to bottom and built a solid manure pit. Thus equipped, they began producing milk in January 2011, with 23 cows and not a heifer. With dairy production underway, the next years were devoted to buying quota and supporting their children's burgeoning interest in dairy shows.

Strength in numbers: shows at reasonable cost!

Credit for the Kennebec animals exhibited in the show ring goes to the couple's daughters: Stacey, aged 23, an agroecomics student

at Laval University; and Laurie, 22, a student in the Farm Management and Technology program at the ITA Saint-Hyacinthe campus. Having developed a keen interest in breeding, they convinced their parents to begin breeding replacement animals so they could take part in dairy shows. They had only one directive: Keep costs down! Building on that momentum, the sisters began to acquire the knowledge they would need to work autonomously. Their action plan included taking part in the Holstein Québec breeding school programme, strategically choosing the farms they worked on, developing an exemplary network of contacts, and getting involved in student organizations and agricultural trade shows. Now masters in the art of cattle fitting and leading in the show ring, they surprised more than a few over the past show season!

When talking about strength in numbers on the Bourque farm, it is also important to underline the contribution of the couple's sons, Matthew, aged 15, and Justin, 13. Matthew attends to the fields and feeding on a daily basis and makes sure the machinery is up to date, while Justin, albeit younger, is already showing an interest in agricultural mechanics and fieldwork.

Animals impossible to forget!

The Kennebec herd's reputation took off dramatically in 2015. Indeed, in only their second appearance at a show, the five animals they exhibited included *Kennebec Windbrook*

Minneapolis, an animal that was sold later in the season and was subsequently crowned Junior Champion at the RAWF the same year. *Minneapolis* now has a number of sisters that are contributing to the popularity of her line.

Another prominent cow, and the family's favourite, is *Kennebec Fever Splash*, EX-93 2E, a problem-free animal that combines conformation, production and fat. Lastly, *Kennebec Stanleycup Niky*, VG-88, has three daughters that have placed in the top 5 at various shows, notably, the Beauce show, the Classique des jeunes ruraux Québécois, the TD Canadian 4-H Dairy Classic in Toronto, and the Supreme Dairy Show.

Pride in their plans for the future!

There isn't a shadow of a doubt that the greatest source of pride for Ferme SS Kennebec is the fact that the entire family is involved in the operation. As for projects, there have been many, and there are many more to come! Among them, the emergence of a second business division devoted to contract heifer rearing, Les élevages Kennebec, of which Sylvain, Laurie and Stacey are shareholders, thus making room for the latter in the operation. Through its continuous development, Ferme SS Kennebec is a model of successful teamwork. It is clear that the family will continue to pursue its objectives over the years to come, promoting and popularizing dairy production while maintaining family harmony!

BY
VÉRONIQUE
LEMONDE

Editor in
Chief



Ferme Roquet

Inspired by the next generation!

*I*n 2021, Ferme Roquet, in Saint-Côme-Linière, unveiled its new, fully automated facilities, equipped with 122 stalls, 2 Lely milking robots, a 15-free-stall area for close-up cows, a calving pen, sand-bedded free stalls, a practical and ingenious gating system, foot baths at robot exits, and much vaster spaces—all to the benefit of these energetic producers in the Beauce.

Ferme Roquet

HERD: 140 head, including 65 lactating cows

PRODUCTION: 12 690 kg of milk, with 4.1% fat and 3.24%

BCA: 276-288-288

CLASSIFICATION: 3 EX – 45 VG – 27 GP

QUOTA: 105 kg BF/day

CROPS: The farm cultivates 330 acres, with 70 acres devoted to corn and alfalfa silage. The Roquet herd is fed a TMR composed of 60% corn silage and 25% round bale hay, in addition to dry corn, soybeans, supplements and minerals.



The owners of Ferme Roquet: Anthony and Sylvio Rodrigue and Barbara Paquet.

“We’re talking about quite a move, a real transformation!” says Barbara Paquet, co-owner of the farm with her partner, Sylvio Rodrigue. In addition to her roles as chair of Lactanet and member of the board of directors of the Ciq, Barbara Paquet is also active on the provincial board of cattle breeding clubs (CP CAB). “And it’s all thanks



Roquet Cocky Seaver EX 93 3E, is the oldest member of the Roquet herd and has brought home many championship titles. Despite her age, Cocky has adapted well to robotic milking

to our younger generation. We decided to convert our farm because Anthony joined us,” she adds. Anthony Rodrigue, an agro-economist graduated from Université Laval, worked for a few months at Lactech and at Desjardins as an analyst before joining his parents on the family farm, where he is now a 50% shareholder.

That change required some decision making, as the 56 tie-stalls and 85-kg quota left no room for expansion. “Now we could easily go up to 200 kg with the new facilities and our 2 milking robots,” Sylvio Rodrigue affirms. “Before, we didn’t have enough space. We had to rent a vacant barn from a neighbour to house our dry cows during the winter. It was getting more and more complicated. It was time to find a solution and make some decisions. By bringing in the next generation, we could consider building and increasing the size of the operation,” he explains.

Thanks to the new facilities, Ferme Roquet is now able to offer optimum comfort to its cows, with comfortable stalls and foot baths.

“The animals have established a routine and are very autonomous. We’ve separated the cows into two groups: first-calf heifers in the first, and second-calf and greater in the second, while also taking into account dominant cows and certain particularities. We’re very proud to say we haven’t lost a single cow in the transition to robotic milking. We tried to limit stress as much as possible for the animals during the changeover. On moving day, for example, we gave them time to run around outside before moving into the new building,” Anthony explains, adding that when they started production in the new barn they also purchased 25 first-calf cows that were accustomed to open housing to give the Roquet cows a chance to adapt to their new environment and provide them with a model to follow.

The breeders now house their 0-23 month-old animals in the old barn, and they continue to put their yearling heifers and dry cows on pasture during the summer, providing shelter when needed.

Keen on shows

The Paquet-Rodrigue team has always liked taking part in dairy shows. So even with their automatic milking system, they continue to focus primarily on complete cows, with good feet and legs. Their breeding strategy is based on very specific sire selection: bulls with a conformation proof around 10, 1200-1400 kg of milk, and 150 kg combined fat and protein.



Roquet Caraïbes Alligator EX 92 2E, and the first Alligator daughter to classify EX in Canada, represents another solid cow family to develop.

Among the noteworthy cows that have marked the Roquet herd is the herd's most senior animal, 10-year-old *Roquet Cocky Seaver*, EX-93 4E. The recipient of many awards, *Cocky* won Reserve Grand Champion at the Bassin de la Chaudière show in 2017, followed by first 5-Year-Old and first Lifetime Production at the Beauce show in 2018. Still milking, *Cocky* has had seven publishable lactations in her career, for a total yield of 98 445 kg of milk, with 4% fat and 3.3% protein.

Overall winner of the Beauce Holstein Club Breeders' Cup last spring, the producers are



Pictured here is *Roquet Lovana Sidekick*, VG-86, and on the right, *Roquet Love Me Sidekick*, also VG-86, two of the eight VG daughters that *OCD Atwood Love*, herself VG-88, has produced so far. An excellent cow family with a promising future. Photo Holstein Québec

particularly proud of their Grand Champion *Roquet Caraïbes Alligator*, EX-92 2E, also first Junior 2-Year-Old at the Beauce fair in 2019. In four publishable lactations, *Caraïbes* has produced 46 485 kg of milk, with 4.6% fat and 3.4% protein.

At the same Breeders' Cup, Ferme Roquet also won Progeny of Dam, thanks to *OCD Atwood Love-ET*, VG-88. *Love's* daughters *Roquet Lovana Sidekick*, VG-86, and *Roquet Love Me Sidekick*, also VG-86, are two cows worth keeping an eye on. Indeed, *Lovana* won Honourable Mention at the same event and is now co-owned by farms Yvon Sicard and Letarte Holstein.

Another of *Love's* daughters, *Roquet Living Sidekick*, VG-88, won third Senior Three-Year-Old at the agricultural show in Chicoutimi this year. In 2019, *Living* also won Reserve Grand Champion at the Junior Championship in Chicoutimi. *Living* is co-owned with Ferme Maguy Normandin (Mabel), the farm where the couple's daughter Jessica Rodrigue lives with her partner, Maxime Bélanger. Meaning that Ferme Roquet's succession is well assured, even at a distance!

"Both producers and animals are very happy here," Barbara Paquet concludes. Note that Ms. Paquet was president of Holstein Québec in 2010 and in 2012, the first woman to hold this position.



Photo Philippe Couture, Sollio Agriculture

BY
VÉRONIQUE
LEMONDE

Editor in
Chief



Switching to robotic milking For a successful start, prepare your animals well!

Making the move to robotic milking is more than a major investment for dairy producers who decide to go down that road. Beyond the economic and technical aspects, there are significant challenges in terms of logistics and animal management, since the herd — ready or not — will have to make the transition to free-stall housing. Like humans, the cows will have to adapt to that change and will require support throughout the transition. The herd's health, longevity, and growth will depend on it!

Because producers work first and foremost with livestock, the transition to robotic milking necessitates a concrete and realistic action plan, with enough latitude to prepare the animals for a complete change of environment. Although the experts consulted agree that about a year's worth of preparation is reasonable, that timeline varies widely depending on the producer, the herd, and the work that needs to be done. "As an overall project—feasibility study, financing, operations, profitability, etc.—the transition period should ideally be planned a year in advance, and at least six months ahead of time," recommends Yota Yotov, of Milkomax. "The animals will need to be acclimatized, mobility-wise, during a 'practice' phase of at least two weeks, and then after being evaluated they can move into the startup phase, which is five to ten days of training and adapting to the milking itself."

"The transition period differs depending on where you're starting from. But generally

speaking, as the majority of producers are switching from a tie-stall management system to a free-stall system, I tell them that the transition lasts on average about a year, the time it takes for every milking cow to have gone through one lactation in the new system. As for the producers, some transfer quickly and adapt extremely well, but in general, I would say a good six months to a year. Of course, if we're also talking about aiming for specific genetics, preparing replacement animals for free-stall housing, selecting animals at birth to keep only those with good potential, then we're looking at three to four years of transition," estimates Pascale Dumais, of Équipements agricoles C.P.R., Lely retailers.

Theory being what it is, the producers *La Revue* spoke with transitioned much more rapidly to robotic milking than the timeframe generally recommended. Sometimes circumstance dictates a quick and sudden transition, as was the case for Samuel

Drolet (Drolie), of Ferme Drolet et fils, in Saint-Raymond. After a fire in August 2020, they immediately decided to switch to robotic milking. By November 2021, the cows were moving back into a new free-stall barn. "What helped in our case was that 45 of our animals were housed at Ferme Jacobs while we were rebuilding. Ferme Jacobs was in the startup phase for robotic milking, so our cows returned home fully prepared for our milking robots. Some of our other cows were kept in open housing on another farm that had a milking parlour. When they came back, they just followed along, imitating the other cows that were going to the robot. During that time, Lely and Sollio provided us with good training on the farm," Samuel Drolet explains.

Gabriel Richard, of Ferme Ricagri inc. (Ricagri), in Leclercville, spent close to a decade developing his project. Nonetheless, once construction of the new barn was underway, it took about a year for the herd to



A DeLaval milking robot.



If the herd has access to an outdoor pasture during the transition period, the cows get used to being more active and moving around on their own.



Photo André Clavet

A useful cage for the hoof trimmer.

transition to robotic milking. An experience much like that of Ferme Bessette et frères (Pavico), in Waterville, where robotic milking began in 2020. “Yes, it took about a year to build the new facility, but the transition period for the animals themselves lasted at most about a month, although a few changes had been made in the herd a few months before,” says Guillaume Bessette.

At Ferme R&M Bilodeau (Matil), in Sherbrooke, where their barn is equipped with 4 Lely A5 milking robots for 220 milking cows, the transition took place in phases, over a period of many years. In 2002, the farm switched to free-stall housing, but the cows were still tied for milking. The first milking robot arrived in 2006. “It made the transition more affordable. We started with free stalls and then waited a few years for the robot. Then, with the cows in late lactation or the cows that had more problems, we continued to milk them tied. We only stopped using our pipeline completely in 2012,” explains Roch Bilodeau, one of the farm’s co-owners. “Going from a 100% tied to 100% free in one fell swoop, in my mind, you’re definitely going to have to cull a few cows. For older cows, those in their third lactation or more, it would be harder for them to make that change.” It is important to keep in mind that, for the cows, the most difficult part of the transition will be the switch to free stalls, not the milking robots per se. When the cows can back up, move to another area to eat and drink, then they’re ready!

First and foremost: pay heed to hooves!

In all our conversations, without exception, taking meticulous care of the hooves, feet, and legs of the cows transitioning to automatic milking was deemed indispensable! It is without a doubt the most important point to consider during this crucial period, said many.

“It should be a priority if a producer wants to switch to robotic milking, it needs to be said,” Gabriel Richard affirms. “In my case, I hired a good hoof trimmer and I had the hooves trimmed regularly in the months before the cows began robotic milking. I didn’t want to miss a single one! All of our cows’ feet and legs have to be healthy before they move to robotic milking, and, especially, to free stalls.” The same was heard from Steve Comtois, of Comestar Holstein (Comestar), in Victoriaville, who took care to trim the hooves of all his animals three or four months prior to starting robotic milking, in 2020.

An important consideration in the months prior to startup in robotic milking is to identify any cows with lameness issues, and then get those problems resolved as much as possible before moving the animals to open housing. “Managing lameness has to be a priority, because fewer milkings on an individual basis is almost always a sign of lameness,” says Dr. André Clavet, a veterinarian at LocoVet Service. During startup, a turning point for the animal, the following points are important: conserve the thickness of the sole, because concrete can be very abrasive for

cows’ hooves; conserve the heel; do a first trim within six weeks of startup; and teach the cow how to use a footbath, to control the spread of digital dermatitis.

Another aspect to look at is the floor on which the cows will be moving about in open housing. “I was very meticulous about having all my new concrete alleys washed with a pressure washer and acid, to remove as many of the rough spots as possible, because they’re very hard on cows’ hooves,” adds Steve Comtois. Having your alleys grooved is also a must for foot and leg health, particularly since the cows tend to be more agitated at the start, in their new environment, and this can lead to hoof injuries. Try walking barefoot on the floor of your free-stall barn to see if it hurts your feet—an easy test to do before you bring the cows in. Another option, one adopted by Guillaume Bessette (Pavico prefix), is to install honeycomb mats to ease the transition.

We’re off and running!

“The transition from tie stalls to free stalls is a major undertaking. The cows have to learn to move around to meet their needs in terms of feeding, consuming enough water, and, finally, milking. The good old routine of dawn and dusk milking has to be left behind gradually, to let the cows go where they want, eat when they want, play... and just be cows. Also, if the cows have a chance to go outside, to walk around in the new barn before startup, that improves the transition and makes startup more efficient,” says Jérôme Voyer, Sales Specialist - AMS at GEA Canada. The owners of Ferme Bessette et frères were already sending their cows outside well before their move to robotic milking, a practice that helped their animals establish good habits.

“In free-stall housing, at the outset, food is offered as an ‘incentive’. It’s also an additional stimulus to get them to walk more,” adds Mr. Yotov, of Milkomax. Another way to train cows to visit and milk at a milking robot is to use a “fake” robot. The Lely Cosmix, for example, is a concentrate feeder for cows that need a little extra feed, but it can also be used as a training cage that simulates a milking robot, a big plus for some animals. Also called a “transition robot”, it’s a technique that Steve Comtois has adopted with the DeLaval VMS V300 milking system. “I have six robots in operation and a seventh that I just use for my close-up yearling heifers,

which offers them a single portion of feed. So they get used to visiting the robot and are less apprehensive about the machine, so to speak. It makes the transition to robotic milking easier for them,” Mr. Comtois explains.

Feeding

During the transition to automatic milking, feeding seems to be the aspect that is the least likely to change, say the various service providers and producers consulted here. Most use mixing robots to offer their milking cows palatable rations. “Our robotic system feeds on demand, 24 hours a day,” says Samuel Drolet. “The cows get their TMR and a supplement at milking. Feeding really wasn’t an issue for the animals during the transition.”

Most agree in recommending that any new feeding regime—or change in feeding—be introduced about a month before startup. “We started with the robot feed about a month before starting up our first robot in 2006. The formulation is a little different, so a portion is also fed at the robot to make sure the cows are eating as much,” Mr. Bessette points out. “It’s good for the herd to be in good health a little before startup, and also, if necessary, to fatten up the leaner ones a little, because startup is stressful. And when they’re stressed, they eat less,” adds Gabriel Richard, of Ferme Ricagri.

Where feeding is concerned, the change is more one of routine than diet. The cows now have to get to the feed bunk on their own.

Natural selection... or not!

During the transition to robotic milking, many wonder if they should be getting rid of certain animals. While that belief is a common one, it is often mistaken. “Oftentimes, it’s not the robot that’s the problem; it’s more the adapting to free-stall housing, the moving around, cows in heat that are bothersome—and I dare say that it’s sometimes the humans that have trouble adapting!” Pascale Dumais affirms.

Very few of the producers consulted for this article removed cows from their herds during the process. “Our entire transition period lasted a month, with a minimal number of cows coming in at one time. Naturally, I started with the cows that were in good shape and well adapted. I selected my best, about 40, and those were the first to go into the robot. Then, about every two days, another group of 10 was introduced,”



A cow exiting a GEA milking robot.

Guillaume Bessette explains. “After that, to expand my herd, I started looking really early on to choose the right bulls with good heel depth, good mobility, a sound mammary system, etc.” For many producers, planning herd genetics ahead of time, many years in advance, allows them to improve their herds gradually, and arrive fully prepared for startup in free-stall housing and robotic milking.

“In the end, I may have culled two cows from the herd after startup. Often, the cows I didn’t think would be able to get through the process did really well, while those that I had great faith in had trouble,” Gabriel Richard recalls. Roch Bilodeau adds: “It’s when it comes time to buy more cows that the question of genetics comes up; for the others, the replacement animals, the objective is to prepare them for free-stall housing before starting up the robotic system. Then, yes, we can start buying cows that are accustomed to the milking robots.” That was also the decision made by Sébastien Bousquet, of Entreprises Gérard Bousquet (Denisquette), in Saint-Denis-sur-Richelieu, when he needed to buy 85 more cows. “I opted to call a broker who was able to find the perfect animals to meet my needs. After two weeks, 99 per cent of my cows were going to the robot without any problems. In six months, I had made up my margins and even more,” he says.

When the “perfect” cow already has experience with robotic milking and free-stall housing, and has well-placed teats, good feet and legs, and is quick at the robot, then so-called “show” cows are not in fact ill-suited to robotic milking. “For me,” says Mr. Richard of Ricagri, “shows are tattooed on my heart. Nowadays, even my robotic cows are big, imposing animals, but if I have to get one

ready for a show, obviously it’ll be a lot more work for me, and I’ll have to manage her separately for a while.”

“Whether to get rid of certain animals or keep them really depends on the individual producer and his or her situation. You really have to evaluate your cows: overall conformity, udder configuration, general health, milk flow, genetics, etc. It’s of ultra-high importance for the startup process. If producers are supported by a technical advisor or a robotic milking specialist and learn the right techniques in terms of ergonomics and animal safety, it can make all the difference and mean being able to keep what I sometimes call the ‘family cow’, the cow that doesn’t fit in, or is just a good old cow,” concludes Jérôme Voyer of GEA.



Sam Drolet, of Ferme Drolet, is photographed here in his free-stall barn, built in 2021 following a fire. The transition from conventional milking to robotics was a sudden and speedy one for the cows in the Drolie herd.