

Calving-ease A.I. sires are lifesavers

by Lorraine Stuart Merrill

ALLAN and Scott Forbes could count on six or seven of every 10 first-calf heifers requiring assistance at calving. Worse still, they were losing several every year to calving difficulties. Both A.I.-trained, the brothers had given up trying to breed heifers artificially as the dairy they manage in partnership with their parents in Lancaster, N.H., grew quickly from 300 cows to their current 1,150 cows. They just couldn't find time to manage breeding.

With natural-service sires, the Forbeses had no way to control for calf size or calving ease. They soon decided they could no longer afford to lose promising replacements.

In 1998, local A.I. technician, Jerry Sherman, asked what it would take to get their business – and Sherman came away with full responsibility for heat detection, sire selection, breeding, and record keeping for the Forbes Farm heifers. Now fewer than 25 percent of heifers need help at calving.

With 1,100 heifers in all, about 100 are in the breeding-age pen at any time. Sherman, or his relief technician, spends about an hour a day at the farm. He watches for heats and breeds right away.

Sherman looks for standing heats and any heifer acting differently from her pen-mates – such as alert or bellying when the others are resting or eating. "Making sure an animal is in heat is more important than timing service," he says. Sherman gets 75 to 80 percent of heifers pregnant on the first or second service. Any open after two services go in with a bull.

Sherman records behaviors or signs observed. Although slated for replacement, the older heifer facility needed no modifications for A.I. Sherman can usually move a heifer by himself from the group into the alley and then into a chute area for breeding. He puts an ear tag with service date and sire in each heifer he breeds and keeps records.

The author is a partner in a 200-cow farm in New Hampshire.


No heat synchronization is used, but Sherman breeds up to six or seven heifers a day. The Forbeses set sire guidelines and a 24-month calving age target. Sherman picks bulls for each heifer, never over 8 percent sire calving ease. He uses only highest-reliability, calving-ease bulls on younger or smaller heifers.

The Forbeses maintain a 3x herd average between 21,500 to 22,000 pounds and raise all heifers born. "We've seen tremendous calving-ease



BROTHERS, ALLAN AND SCOTT, report they've seen a tremendous calving-ease difference with the heifers following the switch to A.I. Allan recommends shifting gradually to A.I.

difference with the heifers," Scott reports. The A.I. daughters perform better on average, too.

Allan recommends shifting gradually to A.I. "We bred half the heifers to start with and compared the results as they calved," he explains. "We found we were having better results with A.I." 

Alfred Bosman

EVEN a veterinarian with a shovel in hand could not prevent what happened on one dreadful September 18 day. It began as a routine farm visit to test for tuberculosis which is required by the state of Michigan. Veterinarian Susan Myers and herd owner Alfred Bosman of Cooperstown, Mich., were both following routine; she was testing heifers for TB in the parlor, while he was separating heifers from the bull in the free stall barn, the Grand Rapids Press reported.

Myers was quite a distance away when she heard Alfred yelling. Although it's not unusual to hear some noise when separating heifers, these yells were not usual. When Susan got back to where she could see the cattle, she could not see Bosman at first. Then she saw Alfred on the ground fighting for his life as the bull pummeled him.

"She jumped into the pen with the bull and started hitting the bull with the shovel," said Sergeant Fred Rosel of the Ottawa County Sheriff's Department in an interview given to The

Grand Rapids Press.

"The bull came toward her and knocked the shovel out of her hand. The bull went back and continued attacking the owner," he said.

A determined veterinarian, Myers did not give up. She ran outside that barn and started ripping the siding off to reach the injured Bosman. "His shirt kept sliding, and she couldn't pull him through," said Sergeant Rosel. Myers then made a call to her Coopersville-based clinic and had co-workers call 911.

When help arrived, Alfred was lying unresponsive in the free stall barn. The 1,400-pound dehorned Holstein bull was still inside, making it difficult to reach him, the sheriff department said. After getting the bull penned off in a different section, he was destroyed. "They shot him four times. The bull was full of adrenaline and weighed 1,400 pounds — it takes a lot to bring them down," Rosel said.

Bosman, a veteran of the U.S. Marine Corps, had 60 cows and two bulls on his property. He left behind four children.