



Getting back on track

Warren and Susan Barriball with baby Nate make sure the 'new' dairy, built five years ago, is clean for the next milking.

Steve Searle

At the end of the 2009/10 drought Waitakaruru farming couple Warren and Susan Barriball knew their farm investment was going backwards.

"We thought we were growing enough grass but something was not right," said Warren, 39, who was farming his parents' farm next door before it was merged into the neighbouring farm six years ago.

"We thought we were feeding the cows enough but production was way down and there were too many empties that we had to carry through to the next season."

They needed answers and they would come, in part, from Warren's former rugby coach. Thames-based Ian Handcock had merged his rugby coaching abilities with his farming knowhow to start his own farmer coaching consultancy,

Target Focus, seven years ago and was indirectly brought into the Barriball picture by their bank.

'Their farm was like the Hilton compared with some farms after two droughts. But they needed a warrant of fitness on the farm and I wrote it independently without anyone else clouding the issues.'

He offers 30 years' experience as a dairy farmer, knows the pressures in

a drought year and his achievements as a farmer were recognised when he won the Coromandel National Bank Sharemilker of the Year award early in his career. It also helped that Ian had coached Warren at North Hauraki Rugby Club several years ago.

"Warren's the 'salt of the earth' type. He's a player you pick to go the full game. He won't throw his toys out of the cot when under stress and has a great work ethic," said Ian.

Warren was certainly under pressure, but this was no 90-minute game. He and Susan had invested in a 20% share of the 59ha farm taken over by Warren's parents, Keith and Peggy, that was to be merged with their 58ha home farm next door.

After the drought two bankers visited the property and agreed to a loan extension, but only on the condition that they engaged a farm consultant. They

recommended Tauranga-based agribusiness consultancy Kerry Ryan and Associates who agreed to help the Barriballs with their business management, but only if they engaged Ian to advise them on on-farm changes.

Ian recalled the difficulty in writing his initial report on how the farm was being run and how to improve things.

"It wasn't that bad," he said. "Their farm was like the Hilton compared with some farms after two droughts. But they needed a warrant of fitness on the farm and I wrote it independently without anyone else clouding the issues."

"We talked about cow numbers, production, pastures, the whole lot and then talked about their goals and standards and where they want to be."

More sustainable

Warren's view was that they needed to get back on track, to be fully feeding the crossbred

Friesian cows, not having to buy in so many heifers and to consistently produce above 100,000kg milksolids(MS)/year. The previous year's production was down to 62,000kg MS, which was a steep drop from 86,000kg MS.

"We wanted a more sustainable system not only in terms of the farm's finances but to have a better work and family balance," said Warren.

The most significant recommendation from Ian was to take 80 cows out of the 405-cow herd.

"That was a shock, to chop the herd by so many cows because there's the view that you're selling off your assets," said Warren.

Ian justified the call by saying this was the number of cows that matched the grass feed supply on the

merged farm.

"In the end there was no vote. Susan and I said we are doing it. We said to Ian 'whatever you say we will do'."

The flip side of the coin was Ian's belief that a production benchmark of 350kg MS/cow was realistic for cows being well-fed at low cost. Previously the herd had produced 210kg MS/cow.

Ian said he was confident of positive gains.

"I was not worried about the outcome. I had talked to Kerry Ryan and he agreed that a reduced herd had to happen."

Independent view

Susan appreciated having an outside and independent view of what could be changed to improve the farm's performance.

"It's what we wanted because

we all knew something had to change. We were prepared to fully commit to making those changes."

'The walks weren't too bad. It takes three hours but you see the patches of grass needing to be under-sown or a fence batten missing a staple; those little things that add up.'

She holds several administration jobs, paid and voluntary, for the Thames Valley Coromandel Playcentre

Association, mostly as a treasurer. She also works hard on the farm, being in labour while milking cows during all five of her pregnancies because "they were not allowed to arrive until milking was finished".

Warren admits he had lost his enthusiasm for their lower-order sharemilking business that was continuing to lose money.

It was a real benefit to be able to talk to Ian about how things could be improved – starting with weekly pasture walks with a new, high-tech platometer.

"The walks weren't too bad," he said. "It takes three hours but you see the patches of grass needing to be under-sown or a fence batten missing a staple; those little things that add up."

Later the walk could be

The Barriball family, from left, Warren with Tori, 8, and Allan, 5, grandparents Peggy and Keith, Teresa, 7, Candace, 3, who is petting the calf, and Susan with baby Nate, 5 months.



done every 10 days with every paddock traversed so that pasture density readings for each paddock could be uploaded into a computer where newly installed LIC software created an accurate feed wedge plan for the farm.

It was needed in order to become more proactive weeks ahead of any looming feed gap – to apply more nitrogen (N) to selected paddocks or make plans to buy in extra supplementary feed.

Gradually the cows responded to more feed, as seen in the herd's production average of 1.5kg MS/cow/day for the first year of recovery and 1.65kg MS last year. This season's target is for 2kg MS/cow/day.

The herd was bumped by 20 cows to 340 but a further increase is not being

considered. Instead the target is 354kg MS/cow or a total of 120,360kg MS.

'It's what we wanted because we all knew something had to change. We were prepared to fully commit to making those changes.'

"We're not getting more stock because we're better off fully feeding the cows we have. If we bought more then we

would have to put more feed into them," said Warren.

A more telling statistic is the production/effective hectare, rather than production/cow, and it has increased 40% from an overall average of 700kg MS/ha to 1090kg MS/ha, to return a net revenue of \$200,000.

Another benchmark is 260 days in-milk, which Ian considers the optimum period for the farm and one that should give Warren and Susan time off, in April, for a holiday with their young family.

A further triumph was the extra milk flowing through the vat prior to Christmas – it exceeded the total collection for the entire previous season.

Regular check-ups

The farm partners meet each quarter with Kerry Ryan

and, depending on financial reporting dates, their banker and accountant also attend.

"There are no surprises," said Warren.

Costs have dropped to \$3.99/kg MS, animal health has been halved to 32c/kg MS, feed and grazing is 83c/kg MS and wages are costing \$1.30/kg MS (reflecting the family farming system).

He takes a personal pride in the herd empty rate being dramatically reduced from 30% to 4% the following year, climbing slightly to 6% in year two.

"We are smiling like anything because we are now searching to find the empties compared with a time when the guys came to do pregnancy tests and found one in three empty and I thought 'God Almighty'."

Susan said it was not long



To match feed supply to herd size, 80 of the crossbred Friesians were culled.



Farm coach Ian Handcock, right, discusses pasture condition (and rugby) with Warren and Susan ... and baby Nate.



ago that if the farm went bust and they had to sell up she and Warren would still owe \$60,000.

Today they would come out \$60,000 ahead – a \$120,000 turnaround in two years – and are confident they can keep building their investment.

She recalled the first year of their recovery plan being a very busy time with the couple out on the farm soon after their children were off to school and allowing themselves only a half hour for lunch.

They bought 150 bales of hay, costing a total of \$14,000, to feed the springers and Susan launched into feeding and shifting cows, sorting out calf sheds and then having to clean and rear calves hit by rotavirus. They are now all vaccinated as a standard precaution.

Making it work

Ian said the turnaround is less about his advice and more about Warren and Susan doing the work and making it all happen.

“There are no excuses. It’s a change of mind-set to say ‘That’s no problem, it can be solved’.”

He takes the same approach to controlling costs – you do what you have to do. He said he repeatedly tells his clients that costs alone should not be the driver of change but are merely the end result of getting the basics right and getting the job done.

Warren sees the difference in being able to work for improved results rather than work just to keep the business running.

He considers the measure of success being more than milk production.

‘We are smiling like anything because we are now searching to find the empties compared to a time when the guys came to do pregnancy tests and found one in three empty and I thought ‘God Almighty’.

The herd’s somatic cell count (SCC) has dropped from 300,000 to 188,000 and then 140,000 with clinical mastitis seen in only four of the 160 cows that had been calved so far this season.

The cows are calving at a body condition score (BCS) of at least 4.5 and calving is

more compact with half the herd calving well ahead of the predicted mean calving date of July 22. They haven't used calf inductions for more than 10 years nor CIDRs for five years.

The focus remains on maximising pasture growth and quality, ideally grazed at the three-leaf stage, and now Warren is considering whether to install a feedpad to reduce any wastage of palm kernel that's fed at 450kg/cow/year.

The pre-grazing target is now 3200-3400kg drymatter (DM)/ha and post-grazing cover is meant to be about 17-1800kg DM during the first spring round of eight weeks to minimise pugging damage. The subsequent residual will be close to 1600kg DM/ha, which is a lot more than was left in their previous grazing management.

"It feels great to see cows come in dripping milk," Warren said. "It's good to know where we are going and to be aiming for 120,000kg MS ... maybe 130,000".

"We can keep improving and are now thinking about five and 10 year targets."



Ian, left, and Warren compare platometer readings to pasture density for the previous round.

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