

Traits to Consider for Tomorrow's Robot Cow

Craig LeRoy, EastGen Solutions Specialist

As more robotic barns appear across the industry, the demand for cows and heifers that have been bred for an automated milking environment is on the rise, with some breeders receiving a premium when selling heifers and cows that were bred for a robotic operation.

Though robots have been continually improving their ability to attach to udders and be more enticing for cows to enter, there is still the need to breed for the "right traits."

Breeders have many different philosophies when breeding cows for robotic facilities, and there has been some shift in focus over the years.

Health

The efficiency of a robotic system is that each individual animal does not have to be physically handled every day; with the most efficient operations handling animals as few times as possible. To achieve this, the cow must stay healthy and get pregnant with as few attempts as possible.

The more an animal is rebred or handled, the less time a cow has to spend eating or lying down, therefore resulting in less milk. More than ever, there is focus on selecting cows for strong health traits such as daughter fertility, mastitis resistance and stronger immune systems to help reduce the time spent handling individual animals.

Continued on page 2...



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Milking speed

Milking speed has been part of selection for producers for many years; however, it is now becoming increasingly important and measurable. More and more barns that were built within the past 10 years are reaching and exceeding their capacity; many of them earlier than expected. Producers are looking to maximize the quantity of milk that can be harvested per robot.

Ensuring that the sires you are using are close to or above average (100) for milking speed can make a large difference in the pounds of fat that can be harvested by each robot. In the future, hopefully milking speed data from the robot software will flow into bull proofs to have the most accurate information as possible.

Feet and Legs

Cows being able to easily get up and go to the robot is imperative to having a successful robotic operation.

Selecting for overall feet and legs has been the strategy for many years; however, many producers are shifting some focus to the thurl placement.

Avoiding bulls that have extreme back thurl placement will help breed animals that will be able to get up and out of the stall for more lactations without their legs going too far out behind them, thus increasing their longevity in robotic operations.

Mammary system

Teat placement and length are still an important criterion; however, as robots improve, there seems to be fewer cows that fail due to poor teat placement. More consideration is being given to selecting udders that have strong attachments and shallow depth to create mammary systems with lots of capacity for milk and that will last over the years.

Udders with a reverse tilt can also cause issues, especially for fresh heifers with substantial swelling. Though this trait is not listed on the proof sheet, selecting bulls with strong fore udder attachment to match the rear udder may help to reduce this issue.

Temperament

Last but not least, would be temperament. This trait has become more of a focus across all barn designs but is even more emphasized in robots. A cow that cannot be milked and causes damage due to kicking the robot often has a short career regardless of all the other carefully selected traits she may have. Also, in a robotic facility, animals require individual handling when being fetched, and temperament is important for worker safety.

Though there are many criteria to be considered when selecting bulls for any management system, it is important to focus on the ones that are most important to your operation. Though the heritability is relatively low on some of the traits, steps must be taken in the right direction to make any progress and not move backward.

As time goes on, hopefully more data will be collected from robots and used to further enhance the way we select sires that produce ideal robot cows. The ability to evaluate which bull's progeny have the most visits, fewest incompletes and highest milking speeds could have a huge impact on efficiency of robotic operations.

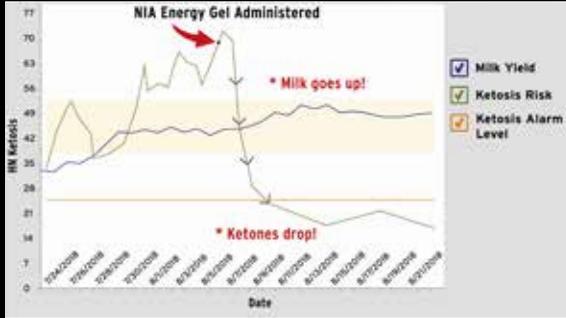
With the evolution of various camera technologies, the possibilities of different information that could be collected to evaluate cow activity and confirmation is endless and very exciting. Robotic operations are increasing in numbers and are here to stay, so putting resources into selecting genetics to best suit these operations will have a significant impact on the industry.

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“Excellent product to help smooth out the post calving transition!”



“For those wanting to reduce cases of clinical ketosis or just get fresh cows off to a better start, Nia Energy Gel is an excellent product to help smooth out the post calving transition. It can be used as standard protocol on any at-risk cow; early calving, twins, off feed, retained placenta, etc. It just feels right to be giving a cow a preventative measure rather than corrective if she does become sick and a vet call is needed.”

Jon Bakker of Hoftzyer Farms, Frankford, Ontario, Milks 110 Holsteins in a three-robot freestall facility

2019 Zone Meetings - Mark Your Calendars!

Niagara (N&S), Haldimand, Wentworth - Zone 10

January 14, 2019, 10:30 a.m.
Abbylayne Farm, 44234 Highway 3,
Lowbanks, Ontario
** Delegate elections

Perth - Zone 11

January 15, 2019, 10:30 a.m.,
Farm of Bryan Zehr, 6566 Perth Road 121,
Milverton, Ontario

Prince Edward - Zone 5

In conjunction with Holstein club meeting
January 16, 2019, 10:30 a.m.,
Bethany Christian Reformed Church,
Bloomfield, Ontario

OXFORD, Brant, Norfolk - Zone 10

In conjunction with Holstein club meeting
January 17 2019, 11:00 a.m.,
Stiek Farms, The Rotteveel Family
884841 Oxford Road 8, Tavistock, Ontario
** Delegate elections

Waterloo - Zone 9

January 18, 2019, 10:30 a.m.
Howard and Lucille Martin,
Marlawn Holsteins,
1847 Three Bridges Road, St. Jacobs, Ontario

HURON - Zone 12

January 22, 2019, 10:30 a.m.
Gubelmann Brown Swiss,
82301 North Line Road 12, Walton, Ontario

Middlesex, Elgin, Essex-Kent, Lambton - Zone 12

January 24, 2019, 10:30 a.m.
Comrie Farms Ltd., The McNaughton Family,
22543 Richmond Street, London, Ontario

Wellington - Zone 9

January 25, 2019, 10:30 a.m.
Eric and Sarah Martin, Bellwin Farms,
6728 1st Line, Elora, Ontario

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Claynook MIAMI 0777HO11295

Lincoln x 8 gen. VG or EX from "Hendel Durham Mitzi" family. A Robot Ready™ source for profit with +3460 GPA LPI, \$2640 Pro\$, +14 Conformation & avg. or above average ratings for every H&F trait!



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