

# COMESTAR ADAPTING TO THE NEW DAIRY REALITIES

By Bonnie Cooper

Comestar Holstein, Victoriaville, Quebec, is one of the most famous herds of all-time. From humble beginnings, Marc and France Comtois took one cow family, the Laurie Sheiks, and bred and developed a line of outstanding animals that have had an enormous impact on Holstein genetics the world over in the last 30 years. As the dairy cattle industry changes so is Comestar, with the Comtois family recently building a new barn with robots to take them into the future.

## A LOOK BACK

"Holsteins are my life," says 63-year-old Marc Comtois, a man whose innate cow sense and marketing talent has earned him immense respect. Marc grew up on a Holstein farm near Victoriaville. His parents, Edgar and Therese Comtois of Comtoise Holsteins, earned a Holstein Canada Master Breeder shield in 1985. Marc left school at 15 and worked on the family farm and for some local breeders for a couple years. In 1976, when he was 18, he bought his own dairy farm in Princeville. He began with a herd of 44 grade animals but soon replaced them with purebred Holsteins. Marc and his wife France Lemieux were married a year later and in time became the parents of four children. In 1987, the couple purchased Marc's parents' farm where Comestar Holstein is presently located. In 1995, they earned the first of two Master Breeder shields (the second in 2009). In 1993, Freddy and Nicole Steen of Belgium became partners in Comestar Holstein, a partnership that lasted until

2007 when Marc and France bought the Steens out to make room for their children to become partners in the farm.

The most important purchase Marc ever made came in 1985 when he bought Elysa Anthony Lea EX-15\*, one of Willowholme Mark Anthony's best daughters. Lea's Puget-Sound Sheik daughter, Comestar Laurie Sheik ET VG-88-23\*, was born in December 1986. Laurie Sheik would change Marc and France's life forever and become one of the most influential cows in breed history. She and her family would draw thousands of visitors and buyers to Comestar and its attractive tie-stall barn.

Laurie Sheik was Honourable Mention All-Canadian and All-American Senior 2-Year-Old in 1989. In 1995, she was voted Holstein Canada's first 'Cow of the

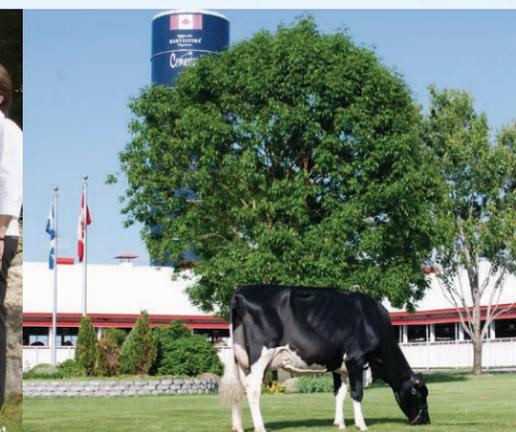
Year' winner. Flushed extensively, Laurie Sheik's best cross was to Blackstar. That mating resulted in two sons, Leader EX Extra GM and Lanky EX-Spain, and four famous daughters: L Or Black VG-87-16\*, two-time 'Cow of the Year' finalist and dam of Outside EX-95 Extra GM and Lystel Leduc EX ST; Laura Black VG-87-24\*, also a two-time 'Cow of the Year' finalist and dam of Lee EX Extra, Top Gun VG Extra, Lartist EX, and Lheros EX-97 Extra, a former #1 Lifetime Profit Index (LPI) sire and Canada's first 97-point bull; Lausan Black VG-87-23\*, the only cow to have a daughter, Lausan Astre VG-85 15\*, and a son, Stormatic EX Extra, at #1 on Canada's LPI lists; and Black Laure De Bois Seigneur EX-90-Belgium, 1996 Belgium National Show Grand Champion, who had a tremendous impact as a brood cow in the herd of Eddy Pussemier of Belgium.



Comestar's foundation cow Elysa Anthony Lea EX 15\* pictured with Marc & France Comtois with Pierre Laliberte from CIAQ.



Marc & France Comtois pictured with partners Nicole & Freddy Steen.



Comestar Lautamie Titanic VG-89-2YR-CAN 33\* Canada's #1 LPI Cow 2006, 2007 & 2008 representing seven generations and 20 years of breeding back to Anthony Lea.





Left to right: Kathleen Comtois, Ryan Comtois, Katleen Dubois, Logan Comtois, Steve Comtois, Aeden Comtois, Marc Comtois, France Lemieux, Alexis Turmel, Lilly-Rose Turmel, Julien Turmel, Julie Comtois, Marie-Fay Turmel, Olivier Turmel



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Marc Comtois

The Laurie Sheik family produced four Millionaire sires at Semex: Leader; Lee; Outside; and Lheros, with Lee a super-Millionaire at 1.5 million doses. The family generated 14 Class Extra bulls making Comestar the all-time leading breeder of Class Extra bulls in history. Semen from Comestar bred bulls was exported to over 55 countries. Comestar Lautamie Titanic VG-89-33\*, a sixth generation Laurie Sheik, was Reserve All-Canadian Junior 2-Year-Old in 2006, a finalist for 'Cow of the Year' in 2010, and the #1 LPI cow in Canada six times from 2006-08. Lautamie had a daughter and granddaughter who were a #1 GLPI cow. Another granddaughter, Lautamai Man O Man VG-87 18\*, is the mother of Lautrust VG Extra and Lamadona Doorman EX-94 2E 16\*, 2016 Reserve All-American Junior 3-Year-Old.

Investments with other partners injected new blood occasionally

into the herd. Stanlee Storm Allison EX-94 3E-6\* was All-Canadian Junior 3-Year-Old in 2002 and Reserve All-Canadian 5-Year-Old in 2004 after being Reserve Grand Champion at the Royal Agricultural Winter Fair. Comtois also housed, and was a partner for several years, in the two-time All-Canadian Lylehaven Lila Z EX-94 25\*. The Comestar prefix appears on several Lila Z progeny including Goldwyn full sisters Lilac VG-89 44\* and Lava VG-87 18\*. Currently, Marc and his family are partners in a cow in Europe that they exported as an embryo, Comestar Doorman O'Katrysha EX-93/MS-95. She was the Junior Champion Cow at the 2019 European Championship Show and Reserve Intermediate Champion at Swiss Expo in 2020. She is a granddaughter of Lovhill Goldwyn Katrysha EX-96 3E, 2015 Grand and Supreme Champion at World Dairy Expo.

Marc and France won their first All-Canadian award in 1979 on Comestar Aramis Marquis. They now have a total 72 All-Canadian Nominations and 11 All-Canadian, 10 Reserve and 15 Honourable Mention awards to their credit. They were Premier Breeder at the Royal Agricultural Winter Fair in 2007. Marc's keen eye for cattle has led him to judge shows in over 20 countries and be the Holstein Judge at the Royal Agricultural Winter Fair in 1999 and 2016.

An astute marketer and promoter, Marc has merchandised and exported countless animals since 1976. He has sold more than 7000 embryos to buyers in 33 countries. Successful herd sales in 1980, 1989, 1996, 2000 and 2006 drew worldwide buyers anxious to acquire genetics from this herd known for its deep pedigrees, top production, show winning type and high index based on balanced breeding.

For a time, Marc even employed his own network of sales representatives to sell genetics from the herd.

### CHANGING TIMES

Comestar had strong genetic sales in the 1980s and 1990s. As the world moved into a new century however, changes began to occur in the Canadian dairy cattle industry that would alter the business dramatically. For Marc and France Comtois it would mean adapting their farm to these new realities.

The first big change came in May 2003 when Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy (BSE), or Mad Cow, was discovered in a Canadian animal resulting in the closure of all live cattle exports from Canada. "Prior to Mad Cow, milk accounted for 5% of our farm's revenue, while sales of bulls, embryos and live cattle accounted for 95%," says Marc. "After Mad Cow hit, we started to buy more milk quota. We have never stopped. We have bought milk quota every month since May 2003." To fill that quota, Comestar began milking cows at a second farm with a step-up parlour and 109-head freestall barn.

Marc had made great use of embryo transfer, with great success. When genetic indexes were introduced in the early 1990s, Comestar bred animals again performed well coming up high on LPI lists. When genomics was introduced in 2008 however, it changed markets for many purebred Holstein breeders who had relied heavily on cattle sales. As Marc points out, "A.I. companies started to produce the bulls themselves. Heifers were now more important than cows and had only a short marketing span in which to make money. The highest sellers were now the big time genomic heifers, but there was no good market for the rest. While we had some high genomic heifers, we sold them because A.I. companies wouldn't release semen from their top young bulls to breeders." He states frankly, "Genomics changed the way I could do business. My sales changed. My job of making bulls didn't exist anymore. It changed my vision. We had to make a change. So I started buying more quota and land."

At the same time, Marc and France also knew they needed to define their children's role and their vision of the farm going forward. In 2013 they brought Ann Louise Carson in as

a consultant to help them develop a strategic plan that would take them from a family farm to a family business. Carson, who has wide leadership experience in the dairy cattle industry, spent three months with Comestar. She talked with family members and provided advice on establishing roles and improving communication and decision making, i.e. weekly meetings. "She also taught us not to be afraid to get external specialists in on different topics," adds Marc.

In 2013, three of Marc and France's four children, Julie, Steve and Kathleen, along with Julie's husband, Julien Turmel, became shareholders in Comestar Holstein. Today, Steve oversees the genetics and breeding decisions of the herd and the new barn. Julie handles the office and paperwork along with her mother. Julien is in charge of the land, machinery and feeding. He also does the ultrasounding, implanting of embryos and inseminating. Kathleen takes care of the calves and manages the employees.

### MILKING WITH ROBOTS

With their sights set on milking more cows, the Comtois family began looking at how best to accomplish that. The tiestall barn had been great for marketing, but as Marc admits, "I knew for a long time that every cow is better in a freestall." While Marc initially thought they should put in another parlour, labour issues forced him to reconsider. "We are going with robots because they aren't going to leave," he declared after one particularly trying day.

On October 13, 2020, Comestar started milking cows in their new freestall barn with robots. The 722 x 142 foot barn has 586 freestalls and room for eight DeLaval VMS™ 300 robots. They are currently milking 370 cows with six robots. A seventh robot is being used to train fresh heifers and dry cows. After just three months, the herd is averaging 39 kilos of milk/cow/day. The barn was constructed for the cows says Marc. Sand is used for bedding. They have Greenfreestalls® with flexible dividers (no steel) and short green, flexible posts, instead of a steel headlock or bar, where the cows eat. There are rubber mats in all the walkways and where the cows drink. There are four box stalls, with a straw bedding pack for calving. The barn utilizes a 'Guided' flow traffic system. DeLaval's Herd Navigator™ program is used for herd management. Instead of a neck strap or leg bracelet, each cow has a computer chip in her ear for monitoring purposes. "When a calf is born, she will now get this chip in her ear that will stay with her her whole life so you know everything about her," says Marc. Comestar has two 8,000 gallon bulk milk tanks at the new barn. "I call them bank tanks because I know how many bulk tanks it takes to pay the bills," laughs Marc. They presently ship 29,000 litres of milk every other day from this barn.

The best advice Marc says he got before building the new barn came from Pepe Ahedo of Spain. "Pepe told me before you build, chose where you are going to build. Then choose your ventilation system,



### COMESTAR QUICK FACTS

- Comestar Holstein, Victoriaville, Quebec, owned by Marc and France Comtois and children Julie and husband Julien Turmel, Steve and Kathleen
- Six full time and four part time employees
- Cows milked in a new freestall barn with robots, plus an older freestall barn with step-up parlour. Have 630 kilos of milk quota currently, 500 for the robot barn and 130 for the parlour barn
- Cows fed a TMR of 70% corn silage, 25% haylage and a 5% mixture of soya, canola, brewers grain and dry distillers grain
- 36 Excellent, 131 Very Good and 198 Good Plus Holstein cows with a herd average of 12,584 kgs milk, 3.9% Fat, 3.3% Protein
- Own 1582 acres of land; 800 acres for corn silage, 400 acres for haylage, 375 acres for barley and soybeans, and balance for pasture

because then you will know where the air is coming from." The new barn, which is built on a slightly elevated piece of land, utilizes a hybrid ventilation system. Two big fans at each end of the barn, plus 135 air entry vents in the roof, provide ventilation in the winter. When the temperature goes above -5 degrees Celsius, the curtains on the sidewalls start to open providing a cross-flow of natural ventilation. There are 33 big, cyclone fans in



the ceiling that will run when it gets too warm, pushing cool air down on the cows' necks and shoulders while they eat so they will be more comfortable and want to eat more.

A new calf nursery has also been built at Comestar to house newborn to 10-day-old calves. The nursery is divided into two rooms, with 10 pens in each, allowing them to fill one room and then totally clean and sanitize it before filling it again with animals. From the nursery, calves move to outdoor hutches. Comestar's old tie-stall barn now holds calves from 4-9 months of age in large pens, and later this year they plan to put freestalls in here for 300 heifers.

## UNWAVERING BREEDING PHILOSOPHY

Today, 90% of Comestar's income comes from milk sales and 10% from genetic sales, almost the reverse of what it was in 2003. "My passion was breeding bulls and cows. Now everything is different. I am back to where I was when I first started farming. I am producing milk," says Marc. "But I am happy and having my family involved is a great honour."

Despite all the changes at Comestar, Marc says, "Our breeding philosophy has not changed. We still want a nice, well-balanced cow who will produce milk for a long time and be profitable. Having a cow that can calve three or more times is what we aim for. I started like that, my father was like that and we are still aiming for that. I have raised four cows who lived to be 18 years old. You get lots of revenue from cows like that. To get that longevity, you need cows with good feet & legs, good udder texture, and the proper rump angle to ensure reproduction."

Currently Comestar uses 80% proven bulls and 10-12% young genomic bulls in their breeding program, with the balance bred to beef bulls. They use sexed semen for all first and second breedings. "We still have a good market for fresh heifers and second lactation cows," says Marc, "and that is why we use sexed semen and raise more heifers than we need." He continues, "We didn't have to buy any cattle when we moved into the new barn. We did it all by natural increase. The first cows to move into the new freestall barn were our tiestall cows, because our cows can work anywhere. They are all built the same."

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Marc foresees demand for milk remaining strong. There will be fewer, but larger dairy farms, producing milk with better facilities, equipment and land. "But in the future," he stresses, "You will need to be a better manager. You will need to know how to manage money and be a good administrator. If you can't, you won't last."

Marc credits his vast success to several things. "I learned from my eyes and ears. My passion for cows is another big reason I'm successful because I had one vision: having nice cows who can produce milk. And then, I have a good wife. We make a good team."

Marc and France have been honoured many times for their achievements. In 2008, they were Dairy Shrine's Dairy Cattle Breeder of the Year. Marc won the Curtis Clark Achievement Award in 1996 and in 2011 was awarded a Certificate of Superior Accomplishment from Holstein Canada. Three awards, however, are the most meaningful to him. "The first is Master Breeder," says Marc. "When I started Comestar my first goal was to be a Master Breeder. We achieved that in 1995. Then having fellow breeders vote us Holstein International's 'Most Influential Breeder of the last 25 Years' in 2019 was very special. And finally, being inducted into the Canadian Agricultural Hall of Fame in 2019. That was unbelievable. It was the result of everything I have done in my life."

At Comestar, profitability will remain the farm's first priority, followed closely by a good quality of life for the family. "France and I know our kids will not run the farm the same as we did. They will want a more balanced farm and family life than we had," Marc says. Competing at Holstein shows will also continue to be important. While Marc and France Comtois want to start slowing down a bit, they are excited to see what their seven grandchildren, five boys and two girls ranging in age from 1-16 years old, will want to do. As Marc says, "My dream is to see my grandkids have the same passion for cows as I do."

