

Farming with the friendly breed

A Waiuku farmer tells **SONITA CHANDAR** about his friendly ayrshire herd.

A WAIUKU farmer on a mission to change perception that ayrshires are not a good breed, says given the right conditions, they can hold their own against the more common breeds.

Hayden and Ellisa Slack 50:50 sharemilk for his parents Robert and Christine at AkaAka southwest of Auckland.

The Slack family have been milking ayrshires for more than four generations after switching from friesians.

"One of the main reasons the family changed to ayrshires was because friesians are so big," Slack says.

"They make a mess of the paddocks and we wanted something a bit smaller. Ayrshires are a medium-sized cow between jersey and friesians which makes them a perfect fit for us."

Of the estimated 6.6 million cattle in New Zealand, only 1-2 per cent are ayrshire but Slack says he likes them. His herd has the highest BW of ayrshire herds in Ward 2.

"I wouldn't want to change to another breed," Slack says.

"About 30 years ago, ayrshires had a bad reputation for being snotty but this is certainly not the case now. They don't peak as high as other breeds – usually 2kg/ms while others peak at 2.2-2.4kgms – but hold their peak for longer without affecting condition."

Their friendly nature is endearing but at times a nuisance Slack says.

"It is really easy to make friends with ayrshires which have an inquisitive nature," he says.

"But, this can be a pain in the backside too. I have got several pets who love to come up for a scratch but often when getting the cows in, these girls will hold up the works by standing there until they get some attention."

Slack was born and raised in AkaAka and always wanted to go farming. At the age of 12, his granddad taught him to drive the tractor and he would spend his days helping with hay and silage making and carting.

"Dairy farming was a career path I had in mind after leaving school," Slack says.

"However, mum and dad told me I couldn't go on the farm and had to learn a trade so I did a building apprenticeship in 1995 and qualified in 2000."

Slack worked in the building industry for eight years. During this time, he spent a year in Canada on an agricultural exchange working on a 810ha grain farm.

"That was an eye-opening experience," he says.

"I spent a lot of my time driving combine harvesters which was great. They were big toys."

In 2002, he returned to AkaAka to work in the building industry as a self-employed builder. On one of his jobs, Slack got to know the family whose daughter set him up on a blind date with Ellisa – a townie.

Born and raised in Pukekohe, Ellisa trained in beauty therapy and by the age of 21, owned Complexions Face and Body Salon in Papakura. The couple married in 2008 and now have three children, Riley 9, Kayla 7 and Danika 6.

"Hayden was building at the time but a few years later, when he said he wanted to go farming, I didn't mind," she says.

"I continued working in beauty therapy and pretty much don't work on the farm. I have never milked a cow or driven the tractor. I think the less you know the better."

Ellisa does the administration for the farm and spends her time involved in the various activities of their children. In the coming season, Ellisa says she will be helping with the cows and calves and learn to drive a tractor.

"Life is just so busy," she says.

"There is always something to do or somewhere to be. If Hayden needs my help I do go to the milking shed and hose down or something. But this coming season, I am happy to help out more especially now that the children are all at school."

In 2006, Slack made the decision to return to farming and took a lower-order position on his parent's second farm milking 200 cows.

"I thought it was time to go back and give it a go," he says.

"Even though I had grown up on the farm, I was pretty green and this was a steep learning curve. I enrolled in an AG ITO level four course and a production management course which were a great help."

In 2008, he entered and won the Auckland Hauraki Dairy Trainee of the Year title.

In that same year, the region suffered a drought and the Slacks were able to lease the farm next door from the end of March and milked once-a-day to get through the season.

"We were lucky that the payout was a

FACTBOX

Owners: Robert and Christine Slack
Sharemilkers: Hayden and Ellisa Slack

Location: Waiuku, Auckland

Farm size: 116 hectares, 30 hectare run-off

Cows: 300 purebred ayrshire

Production: 2013/2014 136,500 kg/ms

Target: 2014/2015 140,500 kg/ms

Farm Working Expenses: \$2.40

boomer," he says.

"The cows were getting green-fed maize and pellets as palm kernel extract (PKE) was a ridiculous price – around \$500/tn."

Later that same year, the neighbour's block next to his parent's other farm came up for sale. The couple decided to take the plunge buying 32ha to combine with the family's 84ha block and shifted their lower order contract to the newly combined 116ha property.

In 2013, the couple stepped up to 50:50. Last season, they milked 320 cows averaging 426kg/ms producing 136,500kg/ms with low input.

For the 2014/15 season, Slack is milking 300 and was on target to produce 140,500kg/ms until the drought hit.

"I think I will still get there," he says.

"Some of the herd has produced well right through the drought and were sitting above 500kg/ms in March and even though we started drying off in April, I am confident we will meet our target."

Cows are fed 1kg of meal mixed with nutrients, magnesium and rumensin through an in-shed system. Around 240 tonne of PKE and 90tn of meal is bought in and 10ha of maize grown on-farm.

The Slacks make as much grass silage as possible and last October/ November, made enough to see them through the drought and still have some in reserve.

"Our goal is to grow as much food as we can, harvest and feed it in the most economical way," he says.

"That is one of the reasons why Dad put in two herd homes. We feed maize from early December and if we feed it in the paddock, there is about 30 per cent wastage which is reduced considerably through feeding it in the herd home."

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2012 costing an estimated \$450,000 – an investment Slack says will pay for itself eventually. The cows are in the herd homes every day.

“We can fit the entire herd in both homes whether they are milkers, springers or dry,” he says

“Cows use less energy when they are warm and dry. They can go out for a break of grass and be brought in if it is raining, meaning there is less damage to the pastures. The advantages are huge.”

All cows are calved in the herd homes meaning calves are born in dry warm conditions which Slack says gives them a good start.

Heifers calve from July 1 and the herd from July 10. Calving runs for 12 weeks with 75-80 kept as replacements.

Calves are fed five litres of colostrum for six weeks then once-a-day. They also have access to calf meal and hay. Slack uses the Queen of Calves program in which nutrient-rich powder is mixed with heated milk.

“We are trying to get the calves bigger so when they come into the herd, they are well-grown,” he says.

“We have found they do well on the

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Hayden Slack with one of his friendly ayrshires.

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Hayden and Ellisa on the farm.

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program and having the milk heated makes training and feeding much easier.”

Slack rears the replacements while Christine helps out during the busy period and looks after the bobby calves. The two mobs are kept in separate

sheds to avoid any problems.

Several bull calves from top BW cows are kept for putting over the herd following AI, well as running with the heifers.

Calves are weaned at 100kg or more. Slack admits he feeds them a bit longer than he needs to but says it is worth the extra work to raise bigger animals.

All calves used to be sent to a grazier but after he was unable to take them due to downsizing, the Slacks purchased a nearby 22ha run-off. Calves now go to the run-off and then to a grazier as yearlings and return as in-calf heifers.

Two thirds of the herd are sent to a

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Cows feeding in the Herd Home.

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separate 32ha run-off from June 1 returning as springers.

"Both farms use the run-off at different times," Slack says.

"Silage is made for both farms and both graze animals there at different

times. We have a good system in place which works well."

Mating begins October 1 before the cows have finished calving. Slack carries out three weeks of pre-mating heats visually.

"They are in the herd home so it is easy," he says.

"We don't need to tail paint or anything because when the herd is feeding, they are all lined up with their backsides out so you can easily see which cows are in heat."

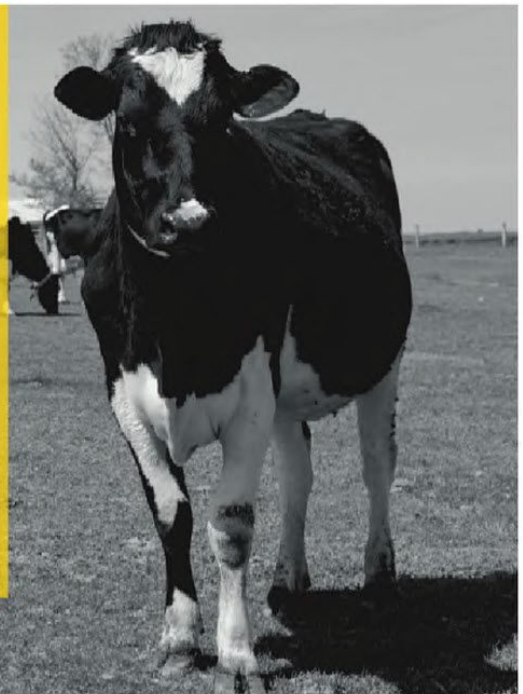
Kamars are applied the day before

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Kamars are applied the day before mating starts and all AI is done by Robert who also has his own run.

"The benefits of having Dad as our technician is the cows can be inseminated immediately after milking," he says.

Because few people milk ayrshires, semen is only available from six proven bulls. The Slacks use their own bulls at the end of AI and this season, have joined the sire proving scheme. Results from the bulls used this year will not be available for two years when the heifers come into the herd.

Slack says the breeding policy has been to use the highest BW bulls available and in recent years, liveweight, capacity and milking speed have been considered as well.

Seventy-five straws of unproven Semar bulls are also used over the herd.

Pasture management is done by eye and paddocks mowed in October ahead of the cows to maintain quality.

Soil tests are carried out every two years and lime applied on two thirds of the farm and fertiliser on a third or half of the farm annually.

A new effluent system was built at the same time as the herd homes, with each having separate systems.



Two herd homes were built in 2012. From left Hayden, Robert, Danika and Riley Slack.

Solids are stored underneath the floors and 500tn is spread on two-thirds of the farm in autumn. Liquid goes into a sump and is spread on paddocks through a k-line pod from May to October.

"The system is easy care and management," Slack says.

"It is easy to deal with and saves on fertiliser but we do have to wait until it rains to apply it."

As a sharemilker, many of his costs are fixed but Slack says his goal now is to cut costs where possible.

"With the lower payout, I would say everyone is looking to trim costs where they can," he says.

"We want to make a profit and reduce debt so eventually, we can progress into farm ownership while at the same, time, show people you can do just as well for yourself by milking ayrshires."

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