



Blood is thicker than water: Tim and Ian Douglas. "I think growing up on the farm, we have a passion for this land."

**Jamie
Ball**



WHEN it comes to hit rate, the Douglas brothers from Titoki (Northland) shoot straight from the hip.

This year, the Douglas boys entered the Northland Dairy Industry Awards for the first time: they not only won, but it's also the first time a pair of brothers have ever landed the premiere award.

Tim (28) and Ian (30) Douglas equity

manage the 310ha family farm which they - along with their parents - are shareholders in, but their collective routes to this point in time are refreshingly far from the norm.

Tim, a qualified and experienced pilot, worked overseas for many years (including two years flying in 16 different countries across Africa) while brother Ian made

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The lie of the land: farm walks are completed every week by the brothers and grazing length of each pasture will be based on growth and perceived growth going forward.

impressive inroads in the hospitality industry overseas, latterly responsible for opening Gordon Ramsey's restaurant in Melbourne a few years back.

Then home came calling - the chance to farm and develop the home property they had grown up on - and three seasons in, there is no looking back.

"I think growing up on the farm, we have a passion for this land. If you grew up on a farm and your parents still own that farm, and they get to a point where they don't want to manage or run it anymore, either you have a good succession plan in process, or the farm is sold," offers Tim.

"It was never our intention to just come in and work in our old man's shadow on his farm. We have to be able to do something for ourselves, and I think that's hugely important for anybody who wants to get in to farming.

"So, for us, being able to keep the family farm in the family and continue to run it well - to have pride in the property - is huge for us," says Tim.

"Deep down we are businessmen more than we're farmers. I love the idea of being involved in the primary industries - creating something from nothing. I feel like when we make a profit, we're not doing it off the back of anybody else: we're doing it by creating something that is valuable to people. This way I can feel that we've truly earned every cent that we've made, and it's not just a quick buck."

"Farming is one of the few things where you can't really screw someone else to make a dollar," adds Ian in full support.

"I guess we're lucky we've been able to pull our resources and our diverse skills together and be able to work together to create a collective equity growth pool,

Vital Statistics

Breed: Friesian X

Herd size: 940 cows

Effective hectares: 310ha (dairy platform) + 120ha of adjacent run-off

Stocking rate: 3 per hectare (across dairy platform)

Milksolids per cow: approx. 360kg (this season)

Milksolids per hectare: 1100kg (this season)

Milksolids per season: 370,000kg (last year) approx. 340,000 this season

Farm working expenses per kg: \$4.43

Profitability per hectare: \$3,419 (2011/2012 season)

Labour efficiency: approx. 125 cows per (full-time) labour unit



Two sizeable herd homes are located alongside the 54-bail rotary at one of the farm.



which will then give us greater options in the future should we choose to diversify.

"I guess the key part of farming for us is that it's a way of life - it's what we know. And both of us seeing the world and working overseas to then come back here to where we grew up - that must be, at the end of the day, the key component. It just draws you back," beams Ian.

Now that they are back, what is it like to be farming through one of the worst

droughts in living memory?

"It's been quite a challenging year this year," says Tim in understatement.

"We didn't grow a lot of spring grass, so the cows didn't peak quite as well as they have previously. It was very wet in the early spring, and then with the drought it makes it harder with the lack of quality forage.

"It went from wet to cold to dry. You can't recipe-farm that. You've got to roll

with the punches as its happening. We try to be fairly pre-emptive with all our decisions and try to be one step ahead of the game.

"We've worked out that by the end of this season, we'll probably have grown 900 tonnes less grass this season than we did last season. With a 300 hectare farm, that's quite significant," says Tim.

The brothers had originally budgeted this season for 350,000kgms but have pared that back to somewhere between 338,000 and 344,000 by the end of the season, depending, of course, on how long the drought goes and how the autumn pans out.

"Production is based not just on how much grass you can grow but the quality of that grass," Tim stresses.

"We get very hot days up here with a lot of solar radiation, which means our grasses suffer through the summer. Up here, we struggle with the seasonal variability that enables you to maintain quality forage, which is the crux of how much you can do per cow."

The Douglas brothers are third generation farmers at the property. Their grandfather largely broke in the original, significantly smaller farm of heavy clay soils, while parents Murray and Marcelle generously added to the land holdings during their tenure.

Being today a "long, skinny farm," by their own description, two milking sheds anchor either end of the property; a 30-aside herringbone and a 54-bail rotary. Two herd homes accompany the recently-built rotary while a sizeable feed-pad sits alongside the herringbone.

The farm is principally twice-a-day, but the system can vary to best support lactation lengths and breeding objectives.

"Our system is built around long lactations and low cow wastage," surmises Tim.

"In order to do that, we individual condition-score and record all animals in February. From that point we're able to get a breakdown of the herd and we take the younger and skinnier animals to go on once-a-day in February or March.

"That helps bring the average of the herd



up a little bit in terms of condition-score, which means you can then milk for longer lactations.

"We then stagger the drying off based on calving dates, so we do age-pregnancies and that enables all the cows to milk as long as they can."

When it comes to mating, the brothers use LIC and like to synchronise both their autumn and spring heifers in order to blanket inseminate.

"We do six weeks of AI in autumn and

then we do six weeks in the spring as well, but we trail with bulls for three to four weeks in the spring."

When the calves do arrive, the bulls are typically sold at four days while we rear all of our replacements with some sold to the China market.

This year, supplementary feed means buying in around 1200kg of feed per cow, a tonne of which will be palm kernel, but in more regular years they will budget for 0.6 of a tonne per cow of brought-in feed.

The brothers do grow 28ha of maize a year on the milking platform, producing 25 tonne to the hectare on average - purely from the effluent they collect, with no nitrogen or fertiliser added.

However, only about 20 per cent, of the farm is presently irrigated.

"It's good to have but it's also a pretty inefficient system, and it's definitely not what you'd call a summer-safe farm. Twenty per cent is not that much when you're trying to feed your cows in a drought, but it's better than nothing."

So, what of the future for this ever-evolving business?

"I guess the key long-term fundamentals for us are to make it a status quo, sustainable, economically viable business that doesn't necessarily require Tim or I to be here on a daily basis," says Ian.

"We're still trying a few different things, but we'll get it to somewhere between 800 to 900 cows and it will then hopefully tick along like that."

"This farm," Tim sums up, "has been built on hard work and increasing land values, and it's got to a point where any further growth is only going to be possible by having good cash businesses, such as sharemilking jobs outside of this farm.

"Because without them, in order for this farm to grow any more, your interest cover is always going to be your limiting factor."

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