Farming Connect Management Exchange

# Tom Jones

# Scotland

# Factors Effecting Suckler Cow Profitability & How They Can Be Improved

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# Background

We’re an upland sheep, suckler beef and pheasant rearing unit.

Prime focus is the efficient production of red meat on a low cost, forage-based system that enhances our soil, maintains water quality and enhances our environment. We run a closed flock and are moving to a closed herd with a strong focus on our health status so customers purchasing our surplus breeding stock can rest assured that it doesn’t compromise their flock or herd health.

Our suckler herd comprises of 50 cows. A mix of continental bred cattle but over the last 3 years we’ve move to sourcing native bred replacements, predominantly Aberdeen Angus heifers. We us a mix of Charolais and Angus bulls, and everything sold store at 18 months.

I’m the third generation of our family to work at Pentre Farm, on leaving secondary school I completed a HND in Agriculture and worked as a contract shepherd and shearer locally.

Since returning to the family farm 12 years ago we’ve changed from a high input, high labour system to a lower input extensive system and trebled sheep numbers along the way. Focus of the family farm has shifted to providing a profitable, sustainable enterprise for future generations.

I’ve been very fortunate to be an HCC Scholar, Tesco Future Farmer, NFU Next Generation Board Member and former Farmers Weekly Focus Farmer. I’ve always enjoyed broadening my knowledge in key areas that will improve our business.

A keen rugby player/supporter, the latter being the more prominent in recent years.

Family farming has always been very close to my heart but never more so than since the birth of our first child in 2020 and with me and my partner due to be married this year, the sustainability of our family farm is at a new level of importance.

# Itinerary

**Stobbart Brothers, High Hall Farm, Penrith.**

A family farm that having previously dispersed their suckler herd in favour of contract finishing dairy bred Wagu cattle are now in the process of re introducing suckler cows to the farm, with different mindset to what they had previously. Their situation is very similar to ours both in herd size and goals as they are moving to a mix of native bred genetics that thrive on forage.

**Robert Parker, Drumdow, Stranraer.**

Robert farms the 230 hectares on the exposed west coast and runs 210 Hereford and Aberdeen Angus cross cows with Hereford and Angus bulls, along with 200 Easycare ewes. Having previously run a herd of continental cross cows very similar to ours and decided back in 2001 to transition to a lower input native bred herd and later introduced a criss cross breeding program using Hereford and Angus. A very simple system of Angus sired females getting bulled with Hereford bulls and vice versa. Surplus heifers were in strong demand as replacements for herd up and down the country. Steers are all sold store at 12 months of age.

**Duncan Morrison, Meikle Maldron, Banchory.**

Duncan farms in the northeast of Scotland, near Aberdeen. Having progressed from managing herds for other farmers in the local area, he now runs 200 cows on a mix of owned and tenanted land. Some cows are also leased from a previous employer. He also works as a contract fencer. The farm runs Angus and Stabiliser cows, both bred pure with the aim of producing replacement males and females. A mix of traditional selection and genetics and more modern EBV selection, and an ET program implanting embryos from north America.

**Geordie Soutar, Dunlouise Angus, Kingston Farm, Forfar.**

A herd of traditional bred Angus cows, and this is defined as

“Our traditional Aberdeen Angus have no imported bloodlines. We are working with original British genetics and are currently using bulls which date back at least 50 years; bringing new life to old bloodlines.”

Smaller framed cattle with blood lines that date back to some of the oldest cow families in the breed, what would be more commonly known as “Belt Buckle Cattle” A very traditional animal but selected on criteria that would be no different to any top herd. Cow efficiency, gestation length and low birth weights are at the top of the selection list. This combined with a forage system and strict selection on type and structure has meant they have produced bulls that have been exported across the world in recent years.

While it could be easy to dismiss this type of animal purely on its size, they have a lot to offer any breeding program that’s looking to produce easy fleshing cattle that thrive outside.

**George Walker, Banochory Farm, Aberdeen.**

George manages the family farm running a 250-cow herd of Angus cows bred pure with the aim of producing breeding females suited to a challenging hill farming environment. Cow type has evolved over time to a lower body weight animal with a greater emphasis of animals that can wean 50% of their weight from marginal forage. While this has been achieved consistently by some cows in the herd, there is still some work to be done. Genetics from New Zealand, America and Australia are being used extensively within the herd. No bulls have been sold for breeding yet but this avenue will be explored in the future if there’s demand.

**Jim Logan, Pirntaton, Galashiels**

Jim and family run a commercial and stud herd of Angus and Hereford cows. Having previously produce pedigree Angus stock, sold through society sales for record prices the emphasis has switched to producing animals that thrive from forage, this has also led to the addition of a Hereford stud to the farm with the purchase of 16 mature Hereford cows from the Ervie Herd.

# Next Steps

After spending time visiting some of the best herds of cattle in the country it left me with a mix of feelings on the future of our herd. It highlighted how far away from my goals of where we currently are. It also left me feeling that our current plan of implementing change over a period of time, as and when cows left the herd, they would be replaced with more fit for purpose animals is probably going to take too long. While our herd is currently profitable, there is so much potential to improve both genetics and in the grazing management.

While my aim was to run a closed herd, but I think for speed of genetic improvement we need to tap into the hard work done by others by sourcing replacements from other high health status herd with similar goals. For the current herd we need to increase pressure on their performance to firstly ensure that they are earning their keep and secondly to allow for a quicker change over to new genetics. The exit options for many of the current cows may not be as cull cows, but as cow calf outfits. This would mean we could potentially replace the herd in a much shorter time period and without causing too much expense and could allow for an expansion of cow numbers with the surplus income from cow/calf sales vs replacement heifer price.

It also throws into question our choice of bulls. Charolais cross store cattle seem to be easily sold in the local area with a small premium paid on quality animals. We may need to explore other sale options if in time we changed to producing solely native bred steers, while I don’t think sale price would be too much lower, it does add pressure on the efficiency of the cows and the need for them to perform. We may be better of not closing our herd, but to continue to source replacements from high health herds and to cross with easy calving terminal bulls that the local market demands. It would also allow us to exploit the increased growth rates of terminal bull’s vs native bred animals. Alternatively, we could explore other options for sale of native bred steers, be this finishing them on farm or sourcing a finisher demanding that type of animal. With far superior eating quality of native bred cattle and the surge in demand for top quality beef, we could potentially look to work with local outlets. This would mean we were in control of the heifers we retained for the herd. It would add some complexity to the system with ensuring bulls are changed regularly, and we are making genetic progress with the bulls we are using. Increasing numbers of breeders producing the type of animal we’d be requiring has made things easier.

Improvements have already begun on the grazing management, cows are on daily moves and weaned cattle are on 3 day moves. Improvement to the water system would reduce this. It would also mean we could graze cattle on other parts of the farm where currently the quantity of water available wouldn’t support them.

KPI’s we plan to focus on are mature weight of cows, but linked in with BCS as we don’t want to fall into the trap cows around the 600kg target weight, but not carrying enough flesh to carry them through harder times during the season or if we were to make the move to outwintering. Weaning 50-55% of the cow’s weight. We are currently weaning around 47-50% of the average cow weight, but the cows are not carrying the condition I would like. Calving pattern has naturally improved over the last 3 year, we are now calving all bar 1 cow in an 8 week window. This I believe has been as a result of improved grazing in the lead up to joining and the consistent feed through bulling. But it has left us thinking this could be tightened further to 6 weeks.

We must also be strict with the type of cow we are also breeding or purchasing. Attention to detail on structure, feet and teet placement is vital. Striking a balance between feminine cows that are easy calving and are low input vs producing the masculine steers with conformation and high performance that the market pays a premium for is a fine line that we must ensure we don’t stray too far from.

# Key Messages to the industry

1. Getting the basics right. A simple system is often the most profitable
2. Stud stock should be reared in an environment equivalent, or tougher than, that in which their progeny is expected to survive in commercially
3. The right genetics are out there.
4. Be strict with yourself and the goals you want to achieve. Focus on the important traits.
5. The days of high input cows are gone, how can we claim to be providing environmental benefits if we’re reliant on inputs.
6. Extremes are out.

Please attach photographs from your exchange with your report.