

Mason Family To Be Honored By Dairy Shrine

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The arrival of Multiple Component Pricing in Federal Milk Marketing Orders more than a decade ago was the opportunity Jersey dairy producers had been waiting generations for. At last was the chance to show dairy manufacturers, fellow producers, and perhaps even themselves, that small brown cows and high-solids milk could not only compete in a market where profitability had long been measured by volume alone, but they could excel.

It was a pivotal point in the breed's history, and it came at a time when something new and special was needed to help Jersey producers seize the opportunity. That something happened in 1993 in the form of a radical new A.I. sire from a virtually unknown farm. Although he always had a minus fat test, his huge Production Type Index (PTI) so perfectly fit the needs of the cheese market that Jersey breeders were almost forced to use him — which they did over and over again. He ultimately sired more cows than any bull in Jersey history, and in the process helped redefine basic perceptions about the breed's commercial capabilities, raise performance expectations for bulls that followed, and rekindle interest in Jerseys that continues to grow throughout the world today.

That bull was Mason Boomer Sooner Berretta, and it is because of the watershed impact he and his herdmates have had in the Jersey breed that Bill, Barbara and David Mason of Buhl, Idaho, have been named National Dairy Shrine Distinguished Dairy Cattle Breeders for 2003. Presentation of the award will be October 2 at the annual Dairy Shrine Awards Banquet during World Dairy Expo in Madison, Wisconsin.

A Most Unlikely Start in Business

That a quantum genetic leap like "Berretta" would come out of the commercially oriented Western U.S. was perhaps not a surprise. That it could come out of Mason Farm becomes understandable after spending just a few hours listening to their intense passion and laser-focused philosophy about developing cattle. Still, it was improbable that such a breakthrough



Bill and Barb Mason with their son David are pictured with one of the great cows of the breed, OSB E Settler Shadow Maggie, the dam of Mason Boomer Sooner Berretta. The Masons will be honored on October 2, 2003, as National Dairy Shrine Distinguished Dairy Cattle Breeders in Madison, Wis.

would occur at a dairy less than 20 years old, whose very existence was much more by accident than design.

Thirty-five years ago, Bill and Barb weren't even in agriculture let alone in dairying. "We're still newcomers in the industry," says Barb. Recently married and living in Portland, Oregon, Bill was a Plant Repair Superintendent and 18-year employee at GTE Telephone, a trade he'd learned during his stint in the U.S. Army. One night he returned from work to find Barb had brought home an injured Jersey cow to care for.

"That's how we got started," says Bill, smiling ear to ear. "Us milking cows is Barb's fault, and I'll always hold her to that."

A short time later they decided to move to Idaho and raise crops at the 150-acre farm that is still their home. A handful of Jersey heifers also made the trip, and they soon found themselves milking a dozen head — with bucket machines and no bulk tank. They shipped milk in cans until the early '80s when their creamery went out of business and they had to switch to another. The new creamery didn't accept cans so they had to buy a bulk tank . . . whereupon they found they needed more cows because the milk level inside the tank

wasn't high enough to reach the stirring paddles.

"The next thing you know we're milking 50 head," says Bill. "Pretty soon we decided we really liked Jerseys. Then it seemed like all of a sudden we're milking 90 head — in a flat barn with bucket machines that we empty by hand into the bulk tank. You can't say we weren't hard-headed!"

Putting in a pipeline made milking more bearable, and in 1987 Bill and David decided to modernize even more by building a double-4 herringbone parlor . . . by themselves. They still milk in it today. Over the years they gradually added acreage, and currently farm 410 acres of alfalfa, corn, barley, wheat, rye grass and triticale. "Our goal was to become totally self-sufficient in feed production so we could ride out these ups and downs in the milk market and still make money," explains Bill.

Right from the start, genetics was a family passion. "It's just something we've always done," says Bill. "When we had Suffolk sheep we tried to breed the best sheep we possibly could. When we had Appaloosa horses it was the same thing. It's a personal challenge that the three of us enjoy. Whatever you do in life, you try to do

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Dairy Shrine Pioneers

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the best you can. Genetics and breeding are kind of a game that really keeps us interested.”

Through A.I., embryo transfer, and solid calf care, herd size gradually grew to their current 250 head milking and 200 heifers. Along the way they have sent 25 bulls into active A.I. service, had 24 cows make at least 100,000 pounds of lifetime milk, and set six Top 25 production records for milk, protein or cheese yield. “Berretta” genetics continue to dominate the Active Jersey Sire rankings: Of the top 30 bulls on the February 2003 list, 26 were either “Berretta” sons or grandsons.

A Leader Who Loves to Laugh

Don't let the overalls and grandpa-like appearance fool you; Bill Mason is as intense and cutting edge a cowman as you'll ever meet. He seems quiet and even a bit shy on the outside, but appearances are deceiving. He loves to laugh, and especially at himself. Ask him if he's having fun being a dairy producer, and he answers instantly:

“Oh yes! Otherwise I wouldn't be doing it. Barb and Dave and I all get a kick out of little things in life. Sometimes it's just a matter of somebody saying something funny or doing something stupid. Laughing at yourself and laughing with others is the way it's supposed to be. If what you're doing isn't fun, you need to do something else.”

When the subject turns to cows, genetics or dairying, Bill is suddenly transformed. His demeanor becomes serious and focused, with opinions that are straightforward, reasoned and practical. He does not beat around the bush. Ask him about a pedigree, a bull, a cow family, or a breeding philosophy, and be prepared for encyclopedic details that are a challenge to keep up with.

It is this combination of friendliness, honesty, down-to-earth practicality, and forward thinking that have brought many leadership positions Bill's way. He has been President of National All-Jersey Inc. for six years and is a 16-year member of its Board of Directors. He is a 14-year director with both his local milk cooperative and the Idaho Jersey Cattle Club, and is past President of each. He also served five years on his local DHIA board and

one year as President.

Breeding a Breakthrough

Although they had no idea how special he would turn out to be, the Masons knew there was great potential for a bull calf even before making the mating that produced “Berretta.” His dam was OSB E Settler Shadow Maggie, which they had bought as a feisty one-horned heifer for \$800 at the 1986 Idaho State Jersey Sale. “Maggie,” who would later set not one, but two all-time Jersey protein records, came out of the herd of fellow Idahoan Hubert Osborne. That herd originated with George



Bill Mason's herd quickly grew from 20 milking cows to over 90 when a bulk tank was installed. Now they milk over 250 Registered Jerseys and have placed over 25 bulls into Active A.I. Photo by Dennis Halliday.

Day, and both of these dairymen shared the Masons' passion for cows with functionality, productivity and longevity.

“We felt the potential for something genetically special was there in ‘Maggie,’” recalls Bill. “Dave decided to mate her to Soldierboy Boomer Sooner of CJF, who was an outlier who created a lot of milk. We thought that if the combination worked, it could really be something.”

When “Berretta” was a calf, Bill recalls that it was impossible to keep him in a hutch or make him stay in a pen. “So we tied him to the tire of a little John Deere manure spreader. When we fed him he would eat his hay and grain and then tip over the spreader, mount the tub, and mount the tire. That was after every feeding, so we decided we've got get this guy into A.I.”

But it took more than just a little selling to convince A.I. organizations. Bill says Jeff Ziegler at Select Sires Inc. was the only one who showed much interest, and it took two calls at that. One was the day “Berretta” was born on March 18, 1989, but nothing happened then. The other was

six months later. Ziegler finally asked for a price. Bill answered \$2,500. Ziegler said “Sold.”

The Jersey world's eyes opened wide to “Berretta” a year later when the national Jersey convention was held in Boise. “Maggie” had just set her first all-time protein record, and three busloads of breeders came out to visit her. What they saw was an extraordinary cow and an exceptional herd, excelling in facilities so basic they probably shocked most of the visitors. Then, as today, Mason Farm has no free stalls, no production strings, no fans or misters, no pampering, and no frills whatsoever.

It was a sight that probably also sent the visitors' imaginations soaring. If such genetics could thrive in these conditions, what might they do with better housing and cow comfort, more aggressive feeding, and maybe more frequent milking? Apparently, they all went home and bought “Berretta” semen and waited to find out.

When he debuted on the Active A.I. List in July 1993, “Berretta” began an unprecedented five-year run as the #1 PTI sire in the breed. His minus fat test made some breeders balk at first, but his enormous total pounds of protein and milk so perfectly fit the cheese market at that time, they were compelled them to use him anyway. To date

“Berretta” has sired over 25,000 Registered Jerseys, more than any other bull in the history of the breed.

“I would give “Berretta” most of the credit as to why non-traditional Jersey breeders are looking at becoming involved with the breed today,” says Jeff Ziegler.

“A Cow Must Be Commercial First”

The Masons modestly credit their success to being in the right place at the right time in Jersey history. But it was also a time when their philosophy of breeding cattle with functional type, high components and animal longevity were the ideal fit for cheese yield pricing.

“Before you can do anything else with her, a cow has to fit your milk market so she can make you money. Then she has to stay in the herd,” explains Bill. “That's what breeding is all about; you have make a living first. We have always tried to focus on protein and functional type. Not necessarily to make a fancy cow that will win a blue ribbon at the fair, but one that will produce and stay in the herd for many years without a lot of help.”

Today, the Masons say they are in a bit of a breeding dilemma. “We’re still trying to create a strong functional cow that can do the job on her own without any enhancements or pampering. There are a lot of good bulls out there, but not one that really triggers something,” explains Bill. “Lately we’ve been breeding a lot of our cows to Danish bulls. The second largest population of Jerseys in the world is in Denmark, and they also have high components. They’re good enough that we want to bring those genes in.”

Bill also has an idea of what the dairy cow of the future needs to be.

“There are a couple of different markets we need to satisfy, with cheese being the primary mover of milk products,” he says. “I don’t think we can ever have too much protein. When you look how much cheese France and Germany and other countries consume, it certainly appears there is still room for the U.S. cheese market to grow. In the fluid market we need to get higher solids. But there are only so many bottles of milk that are going to be sold; the rest is going to go to a manufacturing facility. We need a high production, high component, long lasting cow, because then everybody in the country can use her. I think the focus has to be on creating a functionally sound cow that creates a lot of product by herself and wears well.”

Editors Note: The Masons join seven Jersey breeders who have been previously honored as Distinguished Dairy Cattle Breeders: Col. and Mrs. H. G. Wilde of High Lawn Farm, Lenox, Mass. (1978); Mrs. A. G. Rankin & Sons of Cedarcrest Farms, Faunsdale, Ala. (1981); C. Scott Mayfield, Mayfield Dairy Farms, Athens, Tenn. (1984); John Bishop VI, Ogston, Columbus, N.J. (1987); Robert and Laura Pike and John and Allaire Palmer, Highland Farms Inc., Cornish, Maine (1995); the Robert Stiles Family, Waverly Farm, Clear Brook, Va. (1999); and Walter and Sally Goodrich of Molly Brook Farm, West Danville, Vt. (2002).