

# The farmer wants a life

With the farm switching to OAD, Sophia Clark and Aaron Mills plan to stick with 5.30am cups-on, with the goal of having everyone home at a reasonable time.

Photos: Tracey Robinson

By Samantha Tennent

A keen sharemilking couple are taking a punt on changing to once-a-day milking for the full season for the sake of their team's quality of life.

Standing on a hill out the back of the Paengaroa farm all you can see is a sea of white in every direction, but nestled among the kiwifruit orchards is a stunning jersey herd owned by Aaron Mills and Sophia Clark.

After three seasons they are getting used to the view and enjoying the novelty of being a bit different.

Bernard and Pauline Hermann have owned the farm for 21 years and refuse to let it be absorbed by the orchards that have encroached on them.

"Apparently there used to be several dairy farms in the area, but we're pretty much on our own nowadays," Mills says.

Following the theme of

being different, next season they have decided to start straight off the bat on once-a-day (OAD) milking. Mills and Clark know it could be a gamble but they can see the benefits for their business and the team. And they are confident they have the opportunity to achieve similar production.

"We are milking 535 cows through a 37-a-side herringbone and due to the layout of the farm there are some long walks, so milking can take a bit of time," Mills says.

"We usually go once a day from around Christmas so we're keen to give it a go from the start, take some of that pressure off and hopefully maintain production."

They have also found it

challenging to build a good team so think OAD will add to the appeal and hopefully help them hang onto the great people they have finally got.

"We're competing with jobs like driving forklifts in the pack houses, which is a lot easier than milking cows, and the shifts can be more appealing.

"So we're trying to find ways to make dairying more attractive."

They have a herd manager, Deon Steyn, who has around six years of experience dairying, and an assistant, Hayley Gibbs, who is relatively fresh but they are both reliable and securing good people has been a relief for the couple.

On OAD they will still stick with 5.30am cups-on but the

## FARM FACTS

- **Farm owners:** Bernard and Pauline Hermann
- **Sharemilkers:** Mills Farms Ltd, Sophia Clark and Aaron Mills
- **Location:** Paengaroa, Bay of Plenty
- **Farm size:** 150ha (250ha including the support land)
- **Herd size:** 535 cows
- **Production:** 2021-22: tbc - 171,000kgMS
- **Production target:** 2022-23: 175-180,000kgMS
- **Production target:** 2023-24: 170-180,000kgMS



goal is to have everyone home at a reasonable time. Through calving they operate a roster of six on, two off and for the rest of the season the roster is 11 days on, three days off, which was developed through consultation with the team. They also share around sleep-ins since the shed only needs two to milk.

"We have floated other roster ideas but the team really like having three-day weekends and if they want a longer break every now and then it only takes two annual leave days to extend the weekend and have five days off."

The farm is 250ha all up with 150ha being the milking platform and the rest being the support land the youngstock graze on. The decision to try full-season OAD was also driven by their system and the climate. They are a System 2, sometimes



Sophia Clark and Aaron Mills' herd is in the top 1% for breeding worth in the country.

a System 3 and typically summers can be very dry.

"We won't change much of our management initially, but we want to be less reliant on bought-in feed eventually," Mills says.

They do not grow any crops on the farm as their soil structure makes it tricky to re-establish pastures. They have light, free-draining pumice soils and tend to have weed issues. They usually get

around 150- to 200t dry matter worth of silage off the farm and they buy a little from a neighbour as well as about 100t of maize.

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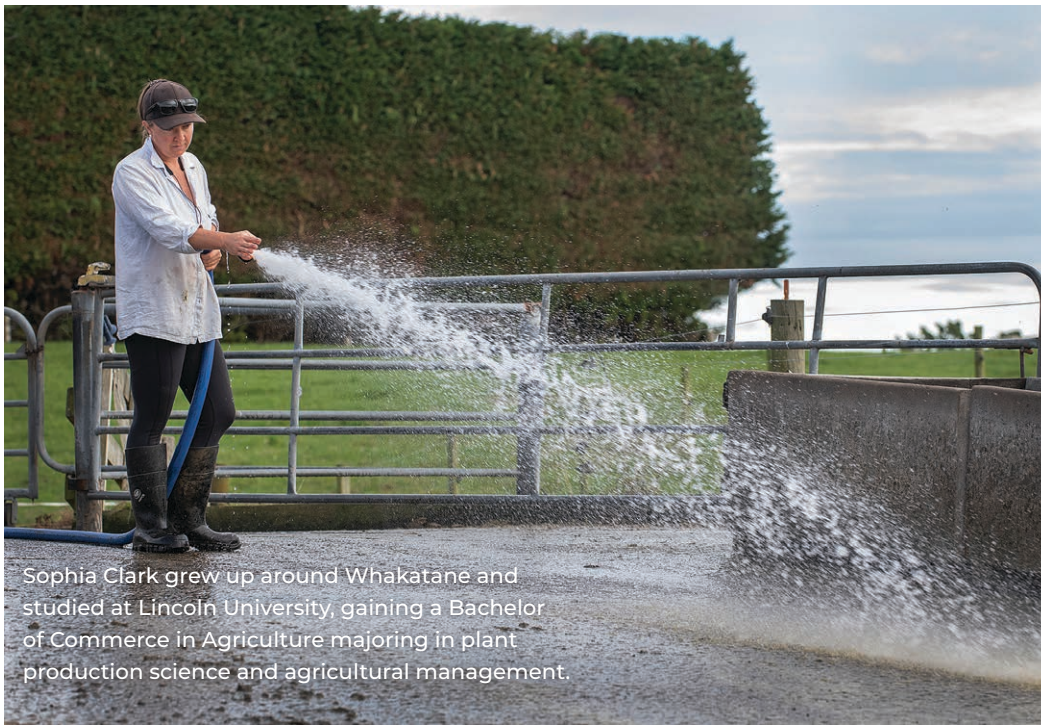
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Sophia Clark grew up around Whakatane and studied at Lincoln University, gaining a Bachelor of Commerce in Agriculture majoring in plant production science and agricultural management.

“With our climate, the year we need a summer crop it probably wouldn’t grow well anyway, so we make do without them.

“We do use palm kernel

if we need to but it’s very season-dependent and changing to once-a-day should reduce our need to bring in feed to plug gaps.”

When it comes to pasture

management, Mills has a big focus on round length. Through winter, the round is between 80 and 90 days and they utilise the spring rotation planner to keep on top of

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Aaron Mills

grazing management while the herd is calving. Once they hit the balance date, which is typically September 5, they are on a 21-day round.

Until they hit a genuine surplus, the rotation stays relatively consistent at 21 days through peak growing. When they shut some paddocks for silage, they stretch it out to

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25 days. Come January, they flick to a 30-day round until it rains. Mills expects to keep everything the same on OAD too.

The farm has a rolling contour, which creates a lot of variation with plate metering so they stick to the dates and round lengths each season and find it reasonably reliable.

"There's just too much variation with all the ups and downs across the paddocks, plus it takes a very long time to get around it all, so for us, it works better to stick to the dates and the learnings from each season," Mills says.

They work closely with Ravensdown and soil test the farm every second year, applying the recommended fertiliser as needed. Their nitrogen use has been limited, largely due to time pressures. They have been using 90 units per season but will hopefully be able to utilise a bit more under OAD.

"We tend to miss the opportunity with nitrogen as we're too busy when we are milking twice a day, especially because we've got the youngstock work to do as well."

They milked 535 cows in the peak this season and have been producing 350kg of milksolids per cow. Next season they are increasing to 545 cows and are keen to achieve the same production on OAD with better reproductive performance,

**Sophia Clark and Aaron Mills' ultimate goal is farm ownership but for now they are striving to achieve similar production on OAD while balancing the lifestyle for their team better.**



having more time available and a better lifestyle opportunity.

They have an outstanding six-week in-calf rate of 84%, which will go a long way to helping keep production up on OAD.

"We are trying to make sure we get as much milk in the vat as possible to try to achieve the same production as we do on twice a day."

Their reproductive performance is usually very good but this season they stepped it up a gear, chasing that early production.

"We were worried because spring had been tough and we were wary of ending up with a drawn-out calving," Mills says.

"We usually have a rule

not to use any intervention but last mating we chose to synchronise a good chunk of the herd, to ensure we were condensing calving as much as possible so we could capture that early milk."

They always metricheck the herd leading into mating and treat any cows with signs of infection. They have a good relationship with their vets and emphasise the health of the herd.

When they moved to the farm three seasons ago, they bought the established herd from the Hermanns. They were the first sharemilkers on the farm and although they had a herd already, this herd was too good of an opportunity to pass up. So they sold their old herd to buy

**"Here we are pretty standalone, which certainly has some great benefits when it comes to biosecurity."**

**Sophia Clark**

this one that was very well established with high genetic Jersey cows.

"We are both really passionate about Jerseys," Mills says.

"We had been including a lot of Jersey genetics in our breeding with the last herd

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**Sophia Clark gives Frank the farm dog his dinner. She and Aaron Mills were both involved in New Zealand Young Farmers but after aging out they have graduated to a local group known as MAFS, middle-aged farm sharns.**

but we worked out it would have taken us 40 years to reach the level of the new herd.

“The cows are pretty elite, they are in the top 1% for breeding worth in the country, so it was a pretty big opportunity for us.”

They are striving to speed up the genetic gain and have been synchronising their heifers and artificially inseminating them. They also use LIC Premier Sires Forward Pack and some of the Jersey Future bulls across the herd. They have sampled 50 straws of international sires from Semex.

“It can be a bit of a punt using unproven bulls but we are seeing great results and the way I look at it, we are getting those really good genetics a few years earlier than we would if we waited, so it’s worth it.”

They have several contract matings for LIC and CRV each season, with 15 confirmed currently with a potential for more through the Jersey Genome programme. They are very proud of their herd and Clark is involved in JerseyNZ and is fascinated by Jersey genetics.

“Aaron converted me to the benefits of a jersey herd, they definitely have their own unique personalities and are very suited to once-a-day milking but can also do excellent production for their live weight when you feed them correctly,” Clark says.

To help drive genetic gain, they determine the bottom 25% of the herd by their breeding worth and production worth and mate them to beef semen to ensure they do not keep any replacements from those cows. They use AI for around five to five and a half weeks and Angus bulls go in for another five or six.

Calving starts July 1 and Clark is in charge of them for the first 12 weeks. The team picks up once daily and they ensure they are all fed gold colostrum, which they are testing to be sure they are getting the best possible.

“We Rotovac the herd and we’ve seen amazing results, it really is money well spent,” Clark says.

“We don’t have any problems with scours and the calves just hit the ground running.”

Calves are fed twice daily for

the first 10 days then they go on once-a-day feeding. They have access to meal and fresh water from day one.

There is always an abundance of replacement calves and the excess are sold on TradeMe. All of the beef calves are sold at four days old and they manage to sell most of the Jersey bull calves with many going to a few consistent buyers every season.

**“Aaron converted me to the benefits of a jersey herd, they definitely have their own unique personalities and are very suited to once-a-day milking.”**  
Sophia Clark

They do keep a handful of the Angus calves to run for the freezer too.

When the keep calves are old enough they move to the back of the farm, where the

paddocks are too far or too steep to milk off. They have 125 in each age group and they see them every day, tending to their different management requirements. They grow well, reach their growth targets easily and become very quiet and friendly from regular contact.

“Our cows usually haven’t been on a truck before so when it comes time for culling it can be a bit of a mission to get them on. They’re really quiet,” Mills says.

The farm is a completely closed system, with minimal biosecurity risks with only 15 to 18 bulls coming on the farm each year and the odd beef animal on neighbouring properties but no other potential animal contact for the herd.

“It’s a pretty unique situation, like back in Waikato there were dairy farms everywhere, and in Taranaki there are so many dairy farms neighbouring each other.

“But here we are pretty standalone which certainly has some great benefits when it comes to biosecurity.”

Mills dabbled in university after school but reckons he did not achieve much. He started down the veterinary science road then switched to applied science majoring in agriculture, but after a couple of years of mucking around he spotted a harvest job on TradeMe. He jumped on a plane and drove combine harvesters across the United States for 12 months, following the grain season.

“We worked from Texas right up to Canada, following the season north,” Mills says.

“It was a great experience and taught me to work long hours, but when I was thinking about what I wanted to do when I got home I knew I didn’t want to go back to uni.”

He had grown up in a town in South Taranaki but his grandparents had a dairy farm and he had plenty of friends who were farming so

it seemed like a good option since his time at university did not lead anywhere.

"I decided dairy farming was a good option, although I got back a few days before Christmas, which was awkward timing to start a dairying job."

He decided to aim high and started applying for low-order sharemilking jobs and manager roles.

"I had time on my side knowing the season was still six months away, so I figured I'd aim high and at least if I didn't get there straight away I'd still land somewhere pretty good."

He managed to secure a managing role just out of Patea and had a crash course in dairy farming. After two seasons on that farm, he moved to Waikato and into a low-order role with the Bryan family, which expanded over a few seasons until he ended

up responsible for 800 cows. Which is also when he met Clark.

"We are a real-life Tinder success story," Mills laughs.

"Sophia was recently back from an OE and although her background was sheep and beef she was doing some work on a dairy farm, so I managed to convert her to dairying properly."

Clark grew up around Whakatane and studied at Lincoln University, gaining a Bachelor of Commerce in Agriculture majoring in plant production science and agricultural management. The couple could clearly see a pathway in dairying, especially with being able to be self-employed and build their assets.

Next was a 50:50 sharemilking role with a 250-cow herd just north of



Round length plays an important role in pasture management for Mills and Clark, extending to 80-90 days over winter.

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Matamata, where they spent four seasons before they got the opportunity to move to their current farm, which has proven to be a great move.

“The herd particularly has been an incredible opportunity for us,” Clark says.

“And we’ve enjoyed learning more about farming on rolling contour and a different soil type.”

When he does get off farm, Mills has been trying to catch a marlin – and it is not for lack of trying that he has not caught one yet.

The couple have a two-year-old daughter, Claire, who is very involved in farm life and Clark is into her gardening, preserving and baking, taking home many titles at the local A&P show.

They were heavily involved in New Zealand Young Farmers but since they have aged out they have graduated to a local group known as MAFS, middle-aged farm sharns.

“It’s a really good way of meeting people, we get together once a month, go have a beer and a look around someone’s farm then have a BBQ or potluck and a few more beers,” Mills says.

“It’s family-friendly too, everyone has kids ranging from babies right up, and we have a group chat to keep in touch.”

The local group caters for all types of farmers so it is a good way for them to connect with other dairy farmers in the region.

“It’s massively beneficial for farming advice, getting tips and tricks from each other, and it can be a relief to see others are facing the same



The decision to try OAD for the full season was driven by the farm’s system and climate. Clark and Mills farm to a System 2-3 depending on how dry the summer is.

**“We are trying to make sure we get as much milk in the vat as possible to try to achieve the same production as we do on twice-a-day.”**

**Aaron Mills**

challenges as you, which you don’t realise till you go to a get together like that.”

Mills entered the New Zealand Dairy Industry Awards when he was early in his managing roles, but found it challenging to put enough effort in as he was still learning so much about his new career path. He and Clark entered the share farming category

together last year and they found it good for networking but knew they did not put in enough to reap the full benefits.

“It’s a great system but you really do get out what you put in and we had a lot going on so just didn’t dedicate enough effort to it.

“We have met some really good people through the awards though.”

They took part in a Mark and Measure course through DairyNZ, which was extremely valuable for their business.

“It was a real eye-opener, such a well-structured course and so useful for us in our business.”

The couple have big goals but no specific timeline; they like to take opportunities as they come. The ultimate goal is farm ownership but for now they are striving to achieve similar production on OAD

while balancing the lifestyle for the team better.

They found it was a big step going from sharemilking 250 cows to 500, especially purchasing such a valuable herd, so they are focused on reducing debt for now. They recognise farm ownership would be another big step and are toying with ideas of a potential in-between step to help grow more equity.

“There are plenty of ways to get where we want to go so we are looking at our options.

“The long-term goal is to own a farm that is large enough to eventually support a contract milker and maybe even a sharemilker, so we know it’ll need to be 400-plus cows.

“But for now we are focused on our herd and building the confidence of the OAD system for both our business and our farm owners.”

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