

## The National Breed Society of Belgian Blues in Denmark

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### Only Belgian Blues are fit for cross breeding

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By *Mogens Stendal*, Senior Advisor for beef breeds in Denmark, 1981/86

#### ***Atypical Danish dairy farmer, Kjeld Sondrup, breeds all his 140 Holstein cows to Belgian Blue sires – and makes profit***

In the northern part of Jutland, near the city Nibe and right on the bay shore, you find the farm Jensminde and 38 years old owner and dairy farmer, Kjeld Sondrup. Since 1992 he has been the 4<sup>th</sup> generation at Jensminde and he operates 225 hectares of land.

Kjeld Sondrup milks 140 Holstein cows, but all land is used for plant production – cereals and rapes. No roughage is grown on the farm which is very unusual for an enterprise with dairy cows. The feeding of the cows is not traditional either, as each cow is fed approx. 4 kg. of grain per day and barley straw ad lib. The average milk production per cow is some 8,000 litres – shipped to the dairy plant. Kjeld Sondrup's advisers find this level of production satisfactory – considering the atypical feeding. Also the reproduction/breeding programme is atypical.

#### **Buys all heifers in calf – sells all calves**

Heifers in calf are purchased six to eight weeks before expected calving because all cows at Jensminde are bred to Belgian Blue sires. In 2003 Kjeld Sondrup practised 253 inseminations – each and everyone with semen from Belgian Blue sires. This makes him number one consumer as far as semen of Belgian Blue sires is concerned. All born calves are sold at the age of five to six months. Besides the calves there is no young stock on the farm.

On an average 12 cows calve every month. Keld Sondrup has agreed with his supplier of heifers in calf to find, buy and deliver the heifers he needs to maintain his dairy herd.

– At the agricultural college I learnt that I should do what I'm good at, Kjeld Sondrup explains. That's what I'm trying to demonstrate. I'm not very good at cattle breeding, so I leave that to my colleagues. But I'm pretty good at rearing calves – and I like the job. I breed all my cows to Belgian Blue sires because I want "good" calves that are easy to work with.

Anyone can convince oneself of the owner's ability to rear calves – "good calves" – by entering the calf barn from 2001 – high ceiling and lots of air. You find baby calves in single pens where they are reared for the first four weeks. You also find four groups of calves at the age of four weeks to five to six months. At that time they are all sold in a local agricultural sale.

#### **Three years wasted**

Kjeld Sondrup explains that he quite accidentally began to breed his cows to Belgian Blues.

– Back in 1992 I didn't know the quality of Belgian Blue crossbreds. So the following year we bred all my cows to Limousine sires. The third year I used Piemontese sires and year four I used semen from various beef breeds. What we did those three years was absolutely wrong – compared

to the first year when we used Belgian Blues. Let me make it absolutely clear: We simply wasted three years by using semen from other beef breeds.

### **Easy calving at Jensminde**

– Normally I'm not present when a cow is going to calve, Kjeld Sondrup explains. The cow needs to do it on her own. In principle we don't know calving difficulties even if all cows are bred to Belgian Blues. If I sense something is wrong I'll watch. So maybe I'm present at ten per cent of all calvings.

### **Belgian Blue crossbreds with vitality and perfect temperament**

– The Belgian Blue crossbreds simply have the will to survive. They are manageable and they understand to make it comfortable for themselves. Their will to survive might make it difficult to spot pneumonia or other diseases. Other sick calves will just remain laying. But not a Belgian Blue crossbred. It comes forward to drink even if it in reality is not too well. A sick calf can die if it does not get the right treatment. I don't regard the Belgian Blue crossbreds' will to live a disadvantage, but you have to look for other signs of sickness than otherwise, Kjeld Sondrup has realized.

– When the calves are so strong it's not because they are crossbreds. It's because they are Belgian Blue crossbreds, Kjeld Sondrup emphasizes – his voice sounds convincing, and he knows what he is talking about as he has already used other beef breeds ...

– I'm pleased with the calves' temperament. They are so affectionate. You can hardly be left alone when you enter the pen. But I'll not blame them – on the contrary. The excellent temperament is just one of many advantages of the Belgian Blue crossbreds.

### **Stenager Eske – a super Belgian Blue sire**

– The sire Stenager Eske was the first Belgian Blue sire we used. His calves were unique. Also the other Belgian Blue sires we have used have done a good job. But Stenager Eske was something special.

*(Stenager Eske was sold to Mr. Grant Chalk, Australia, but the bull never went Down Under. Grant Chalk exported Eske-semen to himself in Australia and a number of other countries and semen was used for AI in Denmark).*

– The colour of the Belgian Blue crossbreds means a lot. They should be roan. Some farmers prefer the roan colour, because the calves look nice, but at any rate the colour is important when the calves are sold in a sale. To many buyers the colour is the visible proof that the calf actually is a Belgian Blue crossbred. That's why I prefer white or roan Belgian Blue sires for insemination, Kjeld Sondrup says.

### **The calf's beginning is important**

– Of course the calves are given colostrums right after birth and access to fresh water. We have experienced a positive effect of giving the calves rolled barley from day one, Kjeld Sondrup says. Some would claim that calves should have a special concentrate mixture for baby calves, but for us it is the Alpha and Omega that the calves' stomach works perfectly. In return I can accept a slightly lower daily gain in the beginning. We'll see a compensatory growth later on and they'll catch up with what they might have lost in the first place.

– From the age of one to two weeks of age the calves get a special concentrate mixture for baby calves and from week six they get a concentrate mixture for fattening calves. Of course they have “food on the table” 24 hours a day.

– Our baby calves have individual pens, but from week four the calves share a bigger pen. We normally ship seven calves every week to the local sale and then the seven biggest calves move “upwards” in the system, Kjeld Sondrup explains. There are approx. 25 calves in the pen with the biggest calves.

### **All calves to the local sale**

– At the age of five to six months we ship the calves to a local sale, Kjeld Sondrup explains. At that age the calves are doing extremely well and it’s easy for the new owner to take over and finish them. And at that time they present a fine appearance – much better than two weeks old. They have thighs and a wide back. The calves are growing well at the time we ship them and they make sure that my “wallet grows” as well ...

### **Only one breed needed**

– So far we have used Belgian Blue sires for insemination for ten years. We have tried several breeds and in my mind there is no doubt – not for one second: Belgian Blues simply is the point. And as I see it only one breed is necessary for cross breeding with dairy cows, a content Kjeld Sondrup claims: The Belgian Blues!