Robot for hire

By LINDA GREENWOOD

A MILKER looking for a job stops at your farm and claims, “I’ll milk 24 hours a day, with no days off and no benefits.”

“You, right!” you skeptically respond. “What’s the catch?”

“Well,” begins the milker, “I’ll cost you about $200,000 ov—”

“Whoa!” you interrupt in disbelief—and spiking blood pressure.

“Over the next seven years,” the employee-wanna-be finishes. “I milk 57 cows a day, but more than three times a day. But you’ll probably need a new barn.”

Before you run him off, you take a deep breath to ask a few questions. “OK, so who are you, and what’s your work experience?”

“I’m Robotic Lely, and I work at Hemdale Farms. My boss, Dale Hemminger, was one of the speakers at February’s ‘Dairy Robotonomics’ session at the New York Farm Show,” the milker proudly claims.

Then pulling out his video player, the dairy techie adds, “Here’s what he had to say about me at the show.”

Hemminger audio

Dale Hemminger: “At Hemdale Farms, Seneca Castle, N.Y., we’ve been using Lely’s Astronaut system since October. Besides the dairy, we’re also into vegetable production. This was one way of expanding the dairy without sacrificing time away from vegetables.

“Just before we broke ground for the new barn, we realized putting bedding in the freestalls was going to be a problem. We quickly changed plans to put the four units in a row on one side of the barn. This way, we can bed stalls without moving the cows.

“Our robotic units milk about 220 cows. We’re averaging 83 pounds on almost all first-calf heifers. We have two units per pen, each milking 55 to 57 cows. We’ve been pleased with bacteria counts, averaging less than 2,000. Somatic cell count is 150,000.”

Back to the job interview

“Impressive, Robotic,” you respond with interest. “But you’ve only been there five months. That’s not very long.”

“Well, if you’d like more background, check out my cousin Robotic DeLaval. He works at Mason Dixon Farms near Gettysburg, Pa. One of his bosses, Doyle Waybright, was also a speaker at the show.” Again, he clicked on his video player.

Waybright audio

Doyle Waybright: “At Mason Dixon, we’ve been using DeLaval’s Voluntary Milking System for over two years. We milk 570 cows with 10 robotic units, averaging 83 pounds milk with 80% in second lactation or greater.

“Cows like going to the robots, where they get a little grain. They average 2.7 visits a day [varies from 1.7 to four].

“Some would go through more than four times if we didn’t limit them. It isn’t unusual to have one being milked, and having two or three waiting in line—night or day. Robot idle time is 10% to 20%. The system shuts down twice a day to wash.

“It’s easier to train cows than the people. You have to avoid overtraining them [the cows] at the beginning, when you make them go get milked. If you do this too often, they’ll wait for you to get them.

“With new cows, 40% will go to the units by themselves by the second milking. Older cows are easier to train than heifers.

“The units will milk most cows. But if the rear teats are too close together or crossed over, the laser can’t tell them apart. Our breeding program now looks at rear teat placement, and we’re not using bulls that are zero or negative.

“Finally, it’ll change how you look at cows. Before robotics, the cows were treated as a group. Now, they are treated as individuals. We’ve gone a full circle, and it’s for the better.”

Closing interview arguments

Pitching his negative edge, you hedge: “Your cousin sounds very experienced. Maybe I should hire him.”

“Hey, we’re both good at milking and we’re proven,” counters Robotic. “We’re FDA-approved for teat preparation and milk quality. We do real-time quarter milking—when a quarter is finished, the attachment quits milking it.

“Your decision comes down to what features are important: the bells and whistles. Cow managing will be done using information obtained with my cow-management computer system.

“The Lely system records milk color, conductivity, milk speed and milk volume and blood levels [milk]. The company claims the unit is less intimidating to cows. It’ll separate unmarketable milk. The attendance level is a good tool for finding sick or lame cows.”

“OK,” you sigh. “It’s impressive, and I’m interested. But I’m not in a position to hire right now. If I do an expansion, I’ll keep you in mind. By the way, what do you think milk prices will do over the next five years?”

Greeenwood is a dairy farmer and frequent contributor from Canton, N.Y.

Catch more robotic Q & A on the Web

MORE than 200 dairy farmers packed into February’s “Robotonomics” seminar in Syracuse, hosted by this publication. Afterward, Dale Hemminger and Doyle Waybright were grilled for more than an hour with questions from dairy farmers.


Enter our ‘Horsing around’ contest

ANERICAN Agriculturist’s 19th annual Northeast Rural Living Photo Contest is about “Horsing around.” The top-placing equine photo will be worth $250, plus a spot on the cover of September’s issue. Winning photos are eligible for up to $600 in total prize money.

Choose a high-quality film like Fuji or Kodak, and film speeds of 200 ASA or lower. We’ll also consider high-resolution digital images (JPEG files), but no digital 4-by-6 prints under 400 dpi.

Contest entry rules

■ You must be a subscriber or family member of an American Agriculturist subscriber.
■ Photos must have been taken by the entrant within the past 18 months.
■ Submit only photos of Northeast rural subjects.
■ Submit images on CD, slides or photo paper. Prints must be at least 4 by 6 inches — and in razor-sharp focus. Save your negatives!
■ Include a copy of the accompanying entry blank with each photo.
■ Print your name, address, phone number and Social Security number on each entry. Please attach an address label.
■ Send no more than five photo entries per person.
■ Mail entries to Northeast Rural Living Photo Contest, American Agriculturist, 52278 Baltimore Pike, Littlestown, PA 17340.