

Milking Shorthorn or Dutch Belted— Which Breed is Best?

We often hear from farmers studying the different breeds available, and they ask us which breed we prefer. We are partial to both Milking Shorthorns and Dutch Belted, and we do not prefer one over the other, for each have their strengths and weaknesses.

We do not claim to have the only cattle that are suited to grass dairying in North America, but we, and many others using our genetics, have found these bloodlines serve very well by efficiently converting pasture to milk and meat at a low cost and without a lot of trouble.

Our family has been breeding Milking Shorthorns since 1936, and Dutch Belted since 1981, so we have had a chance to become very well-versed in their various traits and how best to mate them.

Also, as farmer/breeders, we are able to offer semen at a low cost, since you are buying directly instead of through a network of middlemen.

Both of our breeds are virtually free of metabolic disorders (such as milk fever and ketosis) common to higher-producing breeds.

Frequent and trouble-free calving, mobility (great feet and leg structure), moderate size (between the size of Holsteins and Jerseys) for lower maintenance requirements, and longevity (largely because of their reproductive efficiency), are the traits we appreciate most

about both breeds. They can carry enough flesh to outwinter in good shape.

Dutch Belted cows are the earliest maturing and the most fertile of our two breeds. They breed young and breed back well, very often with a less than 12-month calving interval. They are a little smaller than our Milking Shorthorns, and generally may not milk quite as heavily. Udder quality is excellent, with usually very little edema at freshening.

Our Milking Shorthorns are a little larger and easier-fleshing than the Dutch Belted, and on the average may milk more, especially in response to a little grain, though they also do well on a no-grain system. The Milking Shorthorn steers and cull cows are higher yielding and thus higher value.

We have quite a few polled Milking Shorthorns, whereas the polled trait is not typically seen in the Dutch Belted breed, though we do now have one polled Dutch Belted bull. (Polled means naturally without horns.)

The breeds also differ in temperament. The Dutch Belted are spirited and smart, quite active and usually the leaders of the herd due to their curious nature. Milking Shorthorns are a little more mild and laid back, usually. When someone contacts us looking for a family cow, I usually recommend a Milking Shorthorn for these reasons.

Of course, there are exceptions to any generalizations, and there can be as much difference between individuals as

between breeds, but these are some trends we have observed.

There are very few breeders of purebred Dutch Belted. Our herd is one of only a handful that even raise and collect sires for A.I., and only one major stud even carries Dutch Belted semen, most of which is from our bloodlines.

Milking Shorthorns are more available, and most studs have a few sires on their lists. However, as you may know, the Milking Shorthorn breed association has long had a “genetic expansion” program, which allows use of other dairy breeds, predominantly Red Holstein, with animals up to 25% other breed blood accepted in the herd book. Many of the bulls offered by commercial studs will have some of this outside blood.

Also, mainstream Milking Shorthorn breeders are not generally selecting intensively for the traditional strength and capacity that we need for a grazing system. Rather, most are going more for the extreme sharp and dairy type. The show ring and milk records (without regard for feed and veterinary inputs) often drive their mating choices.

This creates a real problem for those of you turning to Milking Shorthorns for an alternative to Holsteins. That is why we offer heritage Milking Shorthorn genetics that are more adapted to grass dairying. Width, substance, body capacity, sound feet and legs, along with snug long-lasting udders, are vitally important to us.

To conclude this discussion of the different breeds, I will mention Jerseys. We don't have Jerseys ourselves, as we prefer a sturdier cow not prone to milk fever, and we like our vigorous,

self-starting calves. We know that some graziers like to include Jersey blood, and the traditional Jersey certainly excels in components production, so for your convenience we obtain semen from trusted Jersey breeders selecting for longevity, polled heads, high test, and strong functional type.

We currently have one Jersey bull listed, Akhenaton of Netherhall, who is homozygous polled. He has tested A2/A2 for beta casein, which is considered the most desirable genotype.