

Beyond Basics

One couple's quest to develop your best!

In just one year's time, Melanie and Doug Nifong have developed an enterprise that is known nationwide for its exceptional care of the most elite registered dairy cattle. With a goal to "help your investment reach her full potential," they go beyond the ordinary to help develop the extraordinary.

The Nifongs of Me-Do Meadows in Orfordville, WI, will be the first to tell you their operation is unique. They have a five-stall barn in which they rotate three groups of five cows for milking, two times a day. Many varieties of high-quality, free-choice hay are available at all times for the cows to choose. And each and every one of the cows that calls Me-Do Meadows home is their self, or has a pedigree only going as far back as the grand dam that contains an All-American or All-American Nomination. This is not your typical operation. But the elements that make it a success – passion, dedication and knowledge – are familiar attributes of all successful dairymen and women.

Doug and Melanie both began their lives on dairy farms, but on separate sides of the United States. Doug was raised on his family's grade Holstein farm near Winston-Salem, NC, while Melanie grew up in a "showing" family that cared for Registered Holsteins

in Tillamook, OR. Doug showed cattle in 4-H and was bitten by the show bug when he was a junior in high school and had learned how to fit his own calf. The summer after his senior year, he spent some time in New York working for Maggie Murphy and Jim Wright on their farm and at shows throughout the summer. It was at the New York State Fair that year that he was approached by Peter Heffering to help Hanover Hill at the Harrisburg, Madison and Royal shows that fall. "I could show you the pay phone today that I used to call my dad and tell him I wouldn't be coming home that fall," Doug shared with a smile. From that point forward, Doug's Registered Holstein career really took off. He spent three years in New York working for Maggie and Jim on their farm, while also fitting at shows and sales. After his time in

New York, he used Maryland as a home

base but traveled quite a bit working for Ron Heffner and Doug Seidel on the eastern show circuit. In the "off season," Doug learned the tricks of the hoof trimming trade and worked with some of the best herds in the area. After 12 years out East, he headed west to Wisconsin in 1996 and continued the hoof trimming business, while also finding time to work with good cows at shows and sales.

During this time, Melanie and her sister, Stephanie, were growing up on Premium Farms in Oregon. Although they both loved to show, Melanie shared that Stephanie was more dedicated to the cows growing up. After her high school graduation, Melanie decided to "get off the farm for a bit" and go to college. She attended Oregon State University and graduated with a degree in Merchandising Management. From there she spent two years working for Macy's Department Stores in San Francisco. "But," Melanie shared, "I began to realize that was not my future." Missing the country and the cows she grew up with, she moved back to Oregon to

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Doug and Melanie are quick to point out that it is their strong partnership as a couple that has helped their success. While Melanie is "driven and detail oriented," Doug provides the "sense of calm and ability to see the diamond in the rough." Together they are able to pick up what the other may have missed.



work for Nordstrom and help on the farm. By this time, Stephanie and her husband, Mark Miranda, had purchased Premium Farms from their parents Nick & Myrna Steiner.

While working one summer at the Oregon State Show for Mistvale Farm, Mark introduced Doug to Melanie. It wasn't until the Western Fall National Show in Washington later that year that Melanie and Doug started their relationship. After dating for two years, they got married and Melanie moved to Wisconsin – almost exactly in between where they both grew up. After being married for three years, it is their similar goals and passion for good cows that make them a great couple and great co-workers. Shortly after their marriage the decision was made to build an operation of their own.

In March 2005, the farm makeover began. Measuring 42' wide by 148' long, the barn they designed is divided into six bays with large fans. In each of the areas there is a 20 x 20 bedded pack that is cleaned throughout the day in order to keep all of the animals clean and dry. The milking facility is a renovated tie-stall barn, not attached to the new barn. Five "super stalls" were created in this barn that measure 5' wide x 6.5' long each, bedded with a mattress, two-inch foam pad and shavings. There is also space for two large box stalls in the barn with access to pasture. High quality hay is a sought after commodity that Doug finds from across the U.S. and Canada. The hay is available to the cows at all times and is pushed up often. As much as the weather permits, the cows in the new barn have the option of lounging in the pasture. And when it gets too cold or rainy, the curtain sides are dropped. Cow comfort, ease of management and appearance are all elements that Doug and Melanie took into account when building their operation. "When you drove into Hanover Hill, the appearance told you good cows would be seen. No corners were cut. That is one of the goals of our farm," Doug stated.

"The barn was not originally built to house other people's cows. We had owned cows that were living in other people's herds and wanted to start caring for them ourselves," he continued. In June 2005, the first cows came to the remodeled farm. It was in that same month that they got a call from Jeff Butler asking if they would be able to care for Shoremar S Alicia. "She is truly one

of the 'elites' – we were so excited to have her come! It is an honor and privilege to have her on our place," Doug and Melanie agreed. The next cow to check in at Me-Do Meadows was Combination Jed Erica. Then Expo time came and Jeff asked if they could care for some more. "We just stood and smiled at what came off the trailer after Expo last year – Hills-Hope Leduc Becky, Amlaird Lee Adene, Wegnerlann Gabby and Miss Highlight Trillium – what a group!" From there the custom care business took off. They now have a powerful lineup of fourteen milking cows, seven dry cows and eighteen heifers. The milking herd is averaging 91 pounds of milk per day and their classification totals are 10 Excellent and 10 Very Good – seven of which are first calf 2-year-olds. Me-Do Meadows current BAA is 114.7.



One of the guests at Me-Do Meadows is MD-Maple-Dell Roy Image (EX-92, EX-92-MS @ 3-05). After being nominated All-American as a Jr. 2-Year-Old in 2005, Image came back to Expo with force in 2006 and was named Reserve Intermediate Champion. She is owned by Jeff Butler, Mark Butz and Ludwig Farms. Butler compliments the Nifongs and trusts his animals to their care because, "They are really dedicated people who have a great passion for cows."

With this new opportunity, Doug and Melanie developed a new vision for their future. "Our goal is to help our customers' investment reach her full potential. To do that, we believe in a low-stress environment where the cow has the opportunity to tell you what she wants and for us to provide the personal attention and care she needs every day," Doug said. In addition to this, they credit their high quality feed, a facility that is both comfortable and provides a place to display the cows at their best, and their pro-active approach, as elements that encourage the cow to grow into herself. "Our program is geared to each specific cow. They are cared for much in the same way as if they were at a show – hand-mixed feed, washed and led every day, weather permitting," Melanie shared.

Closely working with their customers is also a must. The communication lines are always open and decisions are made together. The owners typically make the

breeding and flushing decisions, while also asking for Doug and Melanie's opinion. On average, they flush three to four animals a month and are currently using such bulls as Advent, Dundee, Roy, Talent and Durham. "It helps that our clients like the same kind of cows that we do – silky and open ribbed with a 'run up hill' stature, sound feet and legs with wide square rumps with room for beautiful rear udders."

Marketing plays an important role for each of their clients in order to capitalize on their investments. To do this, Doug and Melanie make every effort to have the cows and their facilities looking good at all times in the chance that a potential buyer might stop by for a visit. The website they created this past summer has been great for both them and their customers. "The traffic to our

website is great for everyone! We have received 15-20 foreign buyer inquiries each month since we started the website. The exposure it provides is phenomenal!" Melanie emphasized.

Looking to the future, Doug and Melanie don't see themselves milking a barn full. "We enjoy the people and the number of cows we are working with right now, but there will always be room for that extra special one." Some options they are considering for the future are building a new heifer facility or maybe hosting a sale on the farm. The barn was constructed with this in mind and a nearby machine shed would serve as an ideal place for the sale ring. For their personal herd, sound breeding decisions mean a lot for their growth. "Ultimately, it

would be awesome to breed and/or own the Grand Champion cow at Expo. But it is the Premier Breeder distinction that recognizes a lifelong achievement of dedication and making the right decisions. The development of strong cow families is something we truly believe in and look forward to doing within our herd."

The days have gone by quite fast in the past year for Doug and Melanie. And often times they find themselves needing to step back and take it all in. "We continue to strive for more and think of ways to improve our business. We believe our operation has worked because the dairy industry in general is getting larger. Breeders know they can't have the good cows they like in the large dairy environment that is their business." Going the extra mile to provide specialized care for each of the guests at Me-Do Meadows, Doug and Melanie have truly gone and will continue to go beyond the basics. ■