

THE COMFORT column

BY ALEX JENKINS



THE TRANSITION TEAM

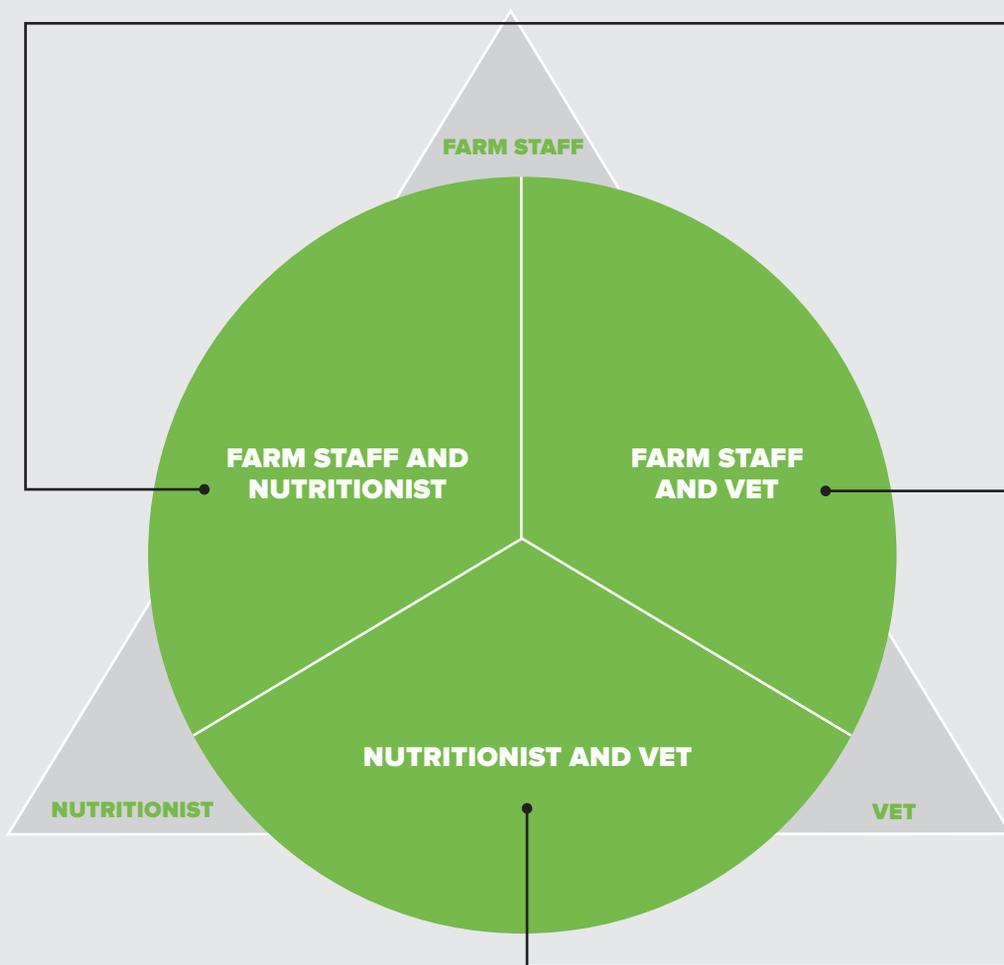
The transition period for a dairy cow is the single most critical period of her lactation. Her profitability and success are entirely driven by how she is looked after from 21 days before to 28 days after calving.

IT'S ABOUT MORE THAN THE RACE

Every June, thousands of brave folks take on the Comrades Marathon between Durban and Pietermaritzburg. The most iconic action always happens over the last few metres – runners collapsing over the finish line, being lifted by their support team, and carried off to recover. This is what we, the public, see of the finishing line. However, for all professional runners, the so-called “big finish” is simply a tiny part of the post-race strategy. Once the cameras recede

into the distance, the recovery work begins. Special diets, supplements, and massage are all critical to the long-term performance of the athlete.

I often feel that our dairy cows are like those runners. They work hard all year, and as they finish the race, they effectively disappear from view. Our focus remains those “profitable girls who pay the bills” and we assume that the dry cows just need a 60-day break before starting again. We forget that, as athletes of the highest order, they need to be actively rested, not passively ignored. We need a system that both rests and recuperates them as effectively as possible. It takes specific, directed cooperation of the whole farming team to prepare our bovine athletes to profitably run all the races we expect of them next year.



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FARM STAFF AND NUTRITIONIST

Your feed adviser and nutritionist should be able to help you measure and manage all the practicalities behind feeding and managing your dry cows.

- Most dry cow issues come back to some kind of difficulty with dry matter intake. Steam-up diets are very nutrient-dense and a small variation in intake can have huge negative effects. That is why it is critical to measure intakes accurately.
- Dry cows need to eat! Check bunk space and never crowd your dry cows.
- Check the cows' body condition score (BCS) at dry-off. If they are too fat or thin, adjust their late-lactation diet. A BCS of 3,5 is a target that you can't afford to miss.
- Test feedstuffs regularly and reformulate to ensure that you are placing the best quality feed in front of the cows.
- Implement the necessary heat abatement strategies both in-feed and on-farm.

FARM STAFF AND VET

Use your farm veterinarian's skill and knowledge to measure and benefit from the best management practices that you can achieve.

- If you measure nothing else, measure your fresh cow issues. Keep accurate records of days open, heat spotting rates, illnesses and treatments, and body condition scores.
- Accurately record all transition cow disorders. Milk fever, mastitis, metritis, ketosis, and lameness all affect the long-term performance of a dairy cow.
- Subclinical milk fever and ketosis can be a huge hidden cost on most farms. Implement a formal plan to measure blood calcium and beta-hydroxybutyrate levels in your fresh cows.
- Meticulously manage the herd's vaccination programme to maximise colostrum quality. Regularly take blood samples from calves 24 hours after birth to determine whether passive immunity is being successfully transferred.

NUTRITIONIST AND VET

Your service providers are people with degrees, doctorates, and pedigrees as long as your arm. Encourage cooperation between all the members of your technical team in order to profitably incorporate the latest scientific know-how into your farming system.

- Understand the inflammatory status of the herd. This is driven by nutrition, mineral status, and cow management. Inflammation is currently the hot topic in animal science, and as more work is done, its importance is constantly confirmed as something worth working on.
- Adjust your nutrition strategy on the basis of veterinary and farm opinion. During the dry period, your mantra should be: "Spend money to make money."
- Mineral status is key and there is a lot of science behind the strategic use of proven complexed mineral forms. Liver samples taken during the dry period and after calving will guide you in achieving the optimal mineral supplementation of your herd. Because this is a specialist area of nutrition, get someone on-farm who clearly understands the animal requirements and the supplementation programme that is being used. 