

“We will meet the needs of every cow, every day. Animal welfare will be of paramount importance.”

PROFIT & MANAGEMENT THE GOALS AT SUMMITHOLM

By Bonnie Cooper

A host of awards for exceptional herd management and high lifetime production line the walls of the Summitholm Holsteins' office at Joe Loewith & Sons Ltd., Lynden, Ontario. For more than 70 years this family farm has been profitably producing milk while maximizing cow comfort and following solid management protocols.

Joe Loewith bought this farm in 1947 after he and his wife, Minna, came to Canada as refugees in 1938 from Czechoslovakia during World War II. Two of their sons, Carl, now 73, and Dave, 68, later joined the operation. “We always had a vision of what this farm was going to be. We were going to be a milk producing farm,” says Dave. Carl's son, Ben, 45, joined the farm in 1999. Today, the family milks 500 cows.

Guiding the Loewiths' management and decision-making is their five-point *Mission Statement*. Posted at the main barn's entrance, it is a constant reminder of the goals the Loewiths have set. Number one: *We will profitably produce a wholesome and nutritious product that the marketplace demands.* “The key word there is ‘profit,’” says Ben. “As silly as it sounds, you can lose sight of the fact that milking cows is a business. The entire goal of this business is to make money. I enjoy what I am doing and the people I work with, but it is a lot more fun if you are making money.” Too often there is a tendency on multi-generational family farms for one's identity to get tied up in the operation with the owner feeling the farm must go on

even when it is losing money and not keeping pace with the industry. “This idea that I am only a caretaker of the farm until the next generation takes it over is completely poison,” feels Ben. “Not only do you trap the next generation, but you trap yourself. That is why having ‘profit’ at the beginning of our Mission Statement reaffirms the fact that our farm is a business first and foremost.”

Number two in their Mission Statement reads: *We will meet the needs of every cow, every day. Animal welfare will be of paramount importance.*

“If there is a cow that is compromised or needs attention it happens that day, not the next day,” states Ben. “And part of making sure that happens is ensuring we always have enough people around so we can look at that cow.” The farm's number of homebred, high lifetime producers is indicative of the care they give. “In the farm's history, 185 homebred cows have made over 100,000 kg milk lifetime. There are 23-25 of those cows still active right now,” says Ben. “For us, that older cow is still our most profitable animal on the farm.” Currently 21% of the herd is in its fifth or greater lactation, over half is in its third or fourth lactation, and 25% are first-lactation heifers.



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Data and information are crucial at Summitholm when setting benchmarks and measuring success in animal health, reproduction, and kilograms of fat/cow/day being shipped off the farm. "It's hard," Ben admits, "to discipline yourself to be recording

all this data. When things are going well, there is almost no value to that data. But where it does become valuable is when things start to go wrong, or you see problems you hadn't noticed before. Then it is incredibly valuable to be able to look back through the past year's worth of data and see where things went wrong." At the core of this is the Loewiths' DHI or milk recording information, plus the animal health data they enter into their computer. Another vital element is their "Good Book," the three-ring binder where they write down the date and any changes that happened to things like infrastructure, stall design, feed, pulsation settings, new product introduction, etc. The "Good Book" allows the Loewiths to pinpoint the exact date of a change, instead of relying on their memory. "The reason we do this is because once every nine months we, along with our key staff, have a formal meeting with our advisors (nutritionist, veterinarian) and go over how everything has been going on the farm for the last year," says Ben. Ahead of that meeting, Ben puts together a booklet that contains every benchmark and piece of data he can pull off the computer. He then gives

each participant a copy of the booklet two weeks before the meeting so they have time to digest the material and ask for additional information. The result; the group more readily identifies and can discuss opportunities or problems when they meet. "The whole purpose of these meetings is to help our farm," states Ben. "These meetings are hugely beneficial and get us away from short-term problem

solving during a herd health visit with the veterinarian."

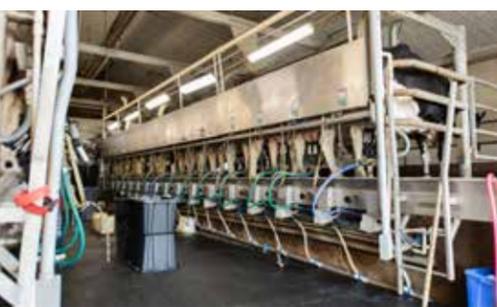
The Loewiths focus on solving only one or two problems at a time. When addressing a problem, Ben says, "We always ask: *What problem are we trying to solve and do better? Why are we changing these protocols? How are we going to measure whether this is working or not?* We try to be as quantitative as we can. Whenever possible, I will collect data on where we are prior to any changes, in order to have a way of measuring the impact, be it good or bad, as a result of that change."

The Loewiths are tenacious when seeking a solution to a problem. For several years they struggled with a high Somatic Cell Count (SCC) of around 250,000, despite having little clinical mastitis and their use of sand bedding. They knew they could do better. It took three years, and many changes, before they discovered it was their milk liners and some of the parlour settings that were causing severe damage to the teat ends of their cows, resulting in a high SCC. After correcting the problem, their SCC dropped to 100,000.

"If we see something that we know is not right, we will keep making changes until we get the response, or type of behaviour, we are looking for," says Ben. As his Uncle Dave says, "The difference between an effective and ineffective manager is not the fact that they both make an equal number of mistakes; it is that an effective manager will quickly identify what isn't working and make the changes necessary for resolution. They are not going to move forward repeating that same mistake!"

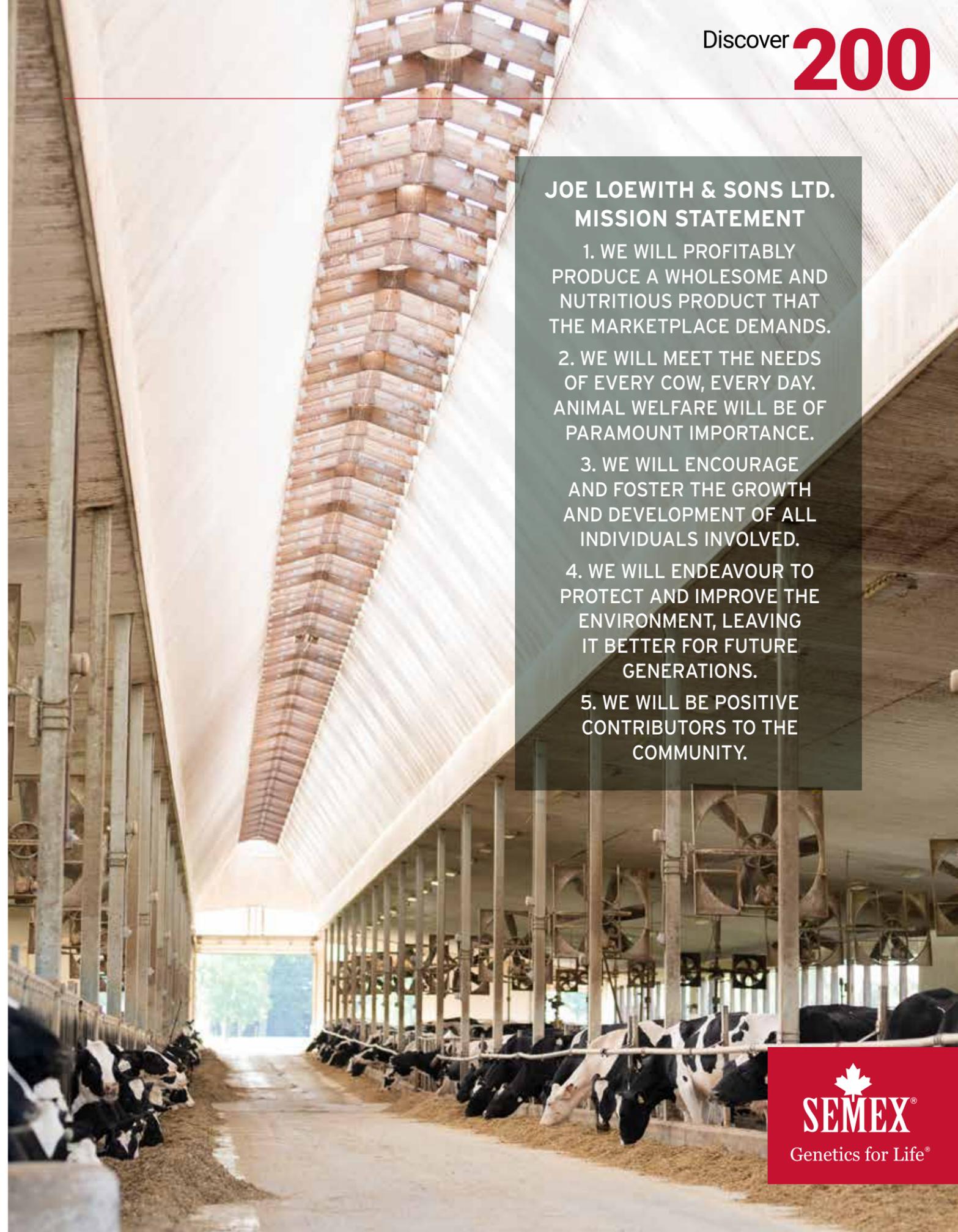
A key part of the Loewiths' management protocol is minimizing the number of changes an animal experiences within a given amount of time. That begins with calf rearing. Newborn calves spend the first nine weeks of their life in hutches where a step-down whole milk feeding program is used. During the last 7-10 days in the hutches, the calf's grain is transitioned to the same grain she will get when moved into a group pen of 10 animals. When she moves again at 4.6 months of age to a group of 25 heifers and free-stalls, her feed again will remain unchanged.

The Loewiths' close-up dry cow facility, built in 2018, is another prime example demonstrating



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1. WE WILL PROFITABLY PRODUCE A WHOLESOME AND NUTRITIOUS PRODUCT THAT THE MARKETPLACE DEMANDS.
2. WE WILL MEET THE NEEDS OF EVERY COW, EVERY DAY. ANIMAL WELFARE WILL BE OF PARAMOUNT IMPORTANCE.
3. WE WILL ENCOURAGE AND FOSTER THE GROWTH AND DEVELOPMENT OF ALL INDIVIDUALS INVOLVED.
4. WE WILL ENDEAVOUR TO PROTECT AND IMPROVE THE ENVIRONMENT, LEAVING IT BETTER FOR FUTURE GENERATIONS.
5. WE WILL BE POSITIVE CONTRIBUTORS TO THE COMMUNITY.





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their efforts to minimize the stress associated with change. A month before a cow calves she is moved into a pen with 10-15 other close-up cows making for a “stable social group.” Ben explains, “Once these animals are moved into that pen, they calve out in that same pen with all their friends. We don’t add any animals to that group until they have all calved. They are not shuffled from one pen to the next. We have two pens for heifers and three for older cows.” While each pen was designed to provide 120 square feet of pack per cow, the Loewiths keep it closer to 150-160 square feet per cow because it results in a cleaner pen. The benefits of this barn have been enormous. “The animals are healthier. Our peak milk at four weeks went from 55 to 60 kg for mature cows. Our stillbirth rate dropped from 11% to 3% for 2-year-olds and 7% to 3% for mature cows. The number of assisted calvings is maybe one in 20,” says Ben. It was an expensive barn to build for a smaller volume of cows, but as Ben states; “We have always had the philosophy that anything you do that benefits cow comfort and gets better results from the cows will pay for itself

in time and is in the financial best interests of the operation.”

“Rumination collars” are put on the Loewiths’ dry cows and springing heifers two weeks prior to calving and are removed three to four weeks after calving. “I was honestly against spending the money on these collars at first, but now I can’t imagine not having them,” remarks Ben. “The collars do a really good job of identifying individuals who are not ruminating. The real value is found in the fact that the collars continue to monitor whether or not treatment has worked. And if it didn’t, it lets us know we need to revisit this cow and try something else.”

One of the valued protocols at Summitholm is testing all of their fresh cows for Ketosis. Blood tests for Ketosis are conducted on days 3, 8, 13 and 18 after calving. The test quickly identifies not only individual cows exhibiting obvious clinical signs of ketosis, but also the high-producing animals that are not as obvious. Thus, providing an opportunity to keep those individuals at top production without crashing.

The Loewiths utilize Canada’s Pro\$ list when selecting bulls for their breeding program. Health traits rank at the top of their selection priorities, followed by production traits, and then no negatives for conformation. “Health traits are big for us, we will eliminate bulls based on health traits,” says Ben. The Loewiths use Semex Immunity+® genomic bulls and Semex’s Elevate® program. “We are pretty happy with our Immunity+ sires and that is something we put value on,” says Ben. “We have been genomically testing all of our heifers for two years with Elevate and are trying to incorporate that data into our mating programs. One of the attractions of Elevate is its ability to test for the A2A2 protein, which could give us a marketing edge in the future.” All of Summitholm’s heifers are bred to sexed semen, while 45% of the milk cows are bred to conventional semen and 55% to beef semen.

Employees are a vital part of any large operation and the Loewiths acknowledge that in their Mission Statement: *We will encourage and foster the growth and development of all individuals involved.* “We couldn’t do what we do without the reliability of the people who work for us,” says Ben frankly. “Part of that is empowering people and giving them responsibility in the areas of the operation they are in charge of.” Among the farm’s key staff are Laura Schuurman, a 12-year employee who is in charge of calf health, breeding decisions, and cattle sales; Rajesh Kumar, who looks after herd health, arrived at Summitholm two years ago with more than 20 years of herd management experience; and Ross Toebes, who took over the farm’s agronomy responsibilities from Carl Loewith when he retired from his day-to-day involvement in 2020.

“We try to give our staff training opportunities and make sure they have the opportunity to go to different seminars and courses. We will also pay up to \$1000 for full-time and \$500 for part-time employees, per year, who complete a skills transfer course to improve themselves, even if it has nothing to do with agriculture,” notes Ben. “As an employer,” he stresses, “you have to have empathy. When I come in the barn I try to have conversations with the staff and get a feel for what is going on in their lives so I have a better understanding of who they are and what I can ask from them.”

The Loewiths are very clear with their employees on animal welfare: “There is no hitting or mistreating of animals. If you see someone treating animals in a way that bothers you, you have a responsibility to come to someone on

the farm and tell them. If you don’t, then you are equally culpable in the mistreatment of that animal.” As a farm manager, Ben feels it is critical that employees feel comfortable reporting incidents of mistreatment. By the same token, if there is a disruptive cow who is constantly creating upheaval and stress for employees, then it is the manager’s responsibility to remove that cow from the farm.

Ben, Dave and Carl Loewith have always had the same shared vision and goal for their farm - to profitably milk cows. They make conscious decisions and once a decision is made they are all 100% behind it, regardless of how it turns out. “We have never had a major disagreement or argument in 50 years,” says Dave.

“Our philosophy is every business, regardless of the industry you are in, should always be looking at increasing revenue,” says Ben. “We have always grown our farm by expanding our buildings and milking more cows. That strategy is going to be more difficult to implement now than it has in the past because margins are tighter. So it behooves us to look at other opportunities outside our core business to increase revenue. That is why we are potentially looking to build our own milk processing plant and have an on-farm store in the future,” he says. As Dave states, “The business is making the decision for us. Now is the time.”

It is that business approach to their farm that is and will keep the Loewiths at the forefront of Canada’s dairy industry.

QUICK FACTS

- Owned by Carl, Dave and Ben Loewith of Joe Loewith & Sons Ltd., Lynden, Ontario.
- Milk 504 cows 3X/day in double-16 parallel parlour. Cows housed in free-stalls with sand bedding.
- Cows average 45-47 kg milk per day, with the herd’s “standard” milk at 50.4 kg per cow. Annual herd average of 14,173 kg milk, 3.5% fat, 3.2% protein.
- Milk cows fed a TMR of 75% corn silage, 25% haylage, plus commodities of soymeal, dry corn, chopped straw, soy hulls and minerals. Water added as needed to keep ration at 45% dry matter.
- Heifers bred at a minimum of 400 days old and calve at 22-23 months of age.
- Crop 350 hectares of land. All fieldwork done by custom operators. Grow corn for silage and hay for haylage. Quality, over quantity, is the ultimate goal.
- Five full-time and 20 part-time staff (including family members).
- Winner of Holstein Canada Master Breeder award in 2002.

