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A smooth transition on the farm

This young Wexford farmer is drawing on the wisdom of her father and grandfather, while charting her own course

James Doran
Teagasc
Enniscorthy

Debbie Sunderland farms with her dad Fred in Aske, Co Wexford, just minutes from the town of Gorey. Debbie's immediate family network is also made up of her mam Julie, younger sister Hannah and her grandfather Sidney, who at 85 years old still plays an active role on the farm.

At just 27, Debbie is now in her fifth year of full-time farming, after deciding in 2014 to return to the farm; much to the delight of her dad Fred.

"After finishing my second level education I experimented with different career paths, such as hair-dressing, where mam already excels, and I completed a course in holistic therapies," says Debbie.

A trip to New Zealand and Australia in 2013 helped Debbie decide that farming was what she wanted to do.

"I always enjoyed being on the farm growing up, but because it is such a male-dominated profession I never really considered it as an option for me." Based on recent CSO figures, women represent just 11%-12% of the agricultural workforce in Ireland.

Once fully in situ on the home farm, Debbie started to influence the business straight away. This was also aided by her decision to complete the Teagasc part-time Green Cert course, which allowed her to continue to work and make management decisions on the farm while arming herself with more technical knowledge.

Debbie and Fred also joined the local Enniscorthy East beef discussion group of which they are very valuable and active members and the group dynamic and exposure has also helped to progress the farm.

Farm system

The main farm enterprise is suckling-to-beef, with a herd of 130 cows. Calving is split between spring and autumn. All male calves are finished as bulls under 16 months; with the



Debbie with her father Fred, grandfather Sidney and James Doran.

heifers finished from 24 to 30 months, depending on their birth dates. Spring barley is grown on an outfarm to supply the local merchant who then compounds the ration for the finishing stock.

It's the breeding aspect of the suckler system where Debbie really excels and gets the most satisfaction. "I really enjoy calving time, when the calves hit the ground it is the first insight as to whether your choice of sire and dam have been successful," she says.

The suckler cows are typically black and red Limousin crosses, with some Simmental crosses too. Debbie fo-

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cuses on high genetic merit terminal bulls to fuel the beef output.

"I prefer Belgian Blue stock bulls," adds Debbie. The last three Belgian Blues had high terminal Euro-star values of €182, €170 and €161 respectively. Limousin stock bulls have

also been used in recent years, with figures for both terminal and replacement indexes exceeding €150. The short-term goal is to focus on breeding herd replacements, but Debbie sees herself returning to all Belgian Blue bulls in the future.

“I like to use the Belgian Blue bulls on the dairy cross cows and Limousin on the three quarter bred continentals. I find that the Belgian Blue bulls are relatively easy calved with the cow type that we have and in my view we have a fancier animal when it comes to sale time.”

Performance

Over the last three years, 90% of the bulls have graded U- or better, with the vast majority grading U= and U+, and approximately 8% of the bulls grading E. Average carcass weights are impressive at 417kg.

Among the heifers, almost 70% have graded U- or better, with average carcass weights of 385kg at an average of 27 months old. Financially, the Teagasc Profit Monitor is consistently showing a gross output of approximately 1,000kg/ha, €2,000/ha and a gross margin of around €1,000/ha.

Heifers purchased

To complement the heifer-finishing system, Debbie buys approximately 40 heifers each year through the local mart network. Some of these, depending on their maternal index and shape, are kept as breeding heifers.

“I’ll also buy some more mature cows and calves from suckler clearance sales, having looked into their suitability and projected performance,” says Debbie.

Debbie has no problem as a woman arriving at the mart and competing in a very male-dominated ringside bidding war.

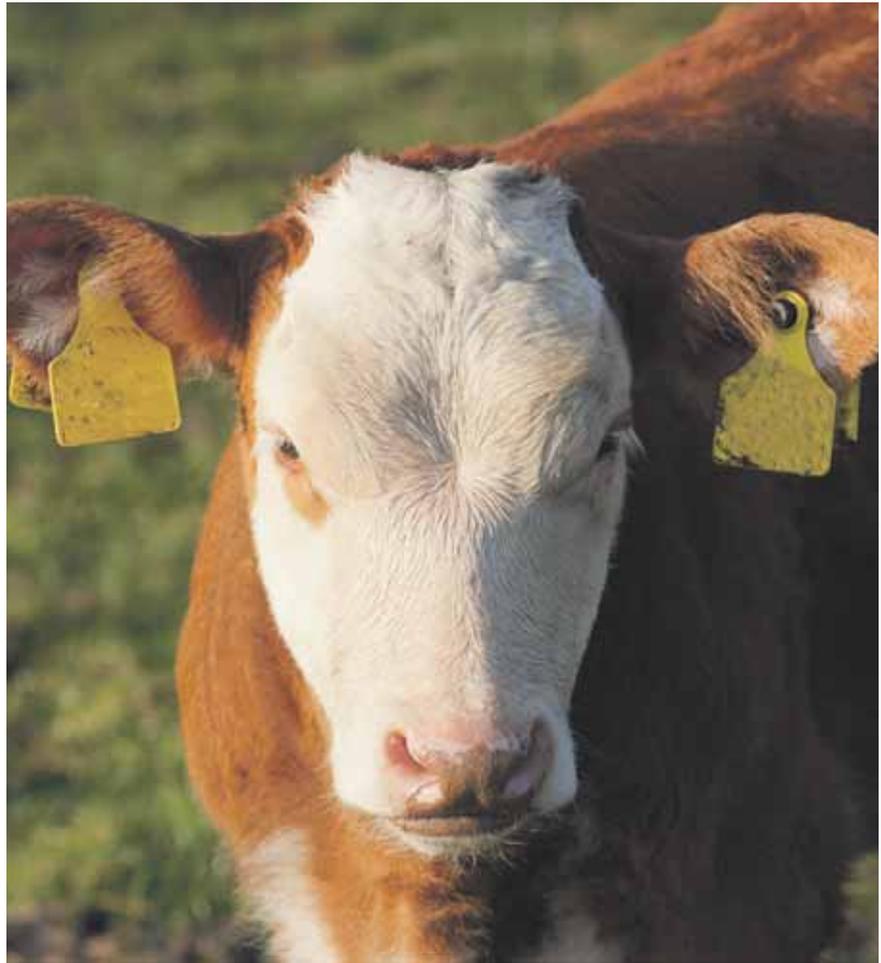
“Any newcomer at the mart needs to learn quickly how to survive and compete when buying or selling cattle,” says grandfather Sidney. “Debbie was never intimidated and the fact that she’s a woman is irrelevant.”

“It was very daunting the first time I started bidding on animals in the mart,” says Debbie. “Trying to put a relative value on an animal and knowing when to stop bidding, especially if you like them, is difficult, but over time you get the hang of it.”

Performance monitoring

Debbie loves monitoring the performance of the finishing animals to make sure they are on track. Finishing bulls are weighed every four to six weeks once they are on their ad-lib diet, with consistent weight gains of 1.8-2.0kg/day.

A high-energy cereal-based diet



Plans for the future

As Debbie is committed to full time farming plans are being put in place to enable her to manage the farm effectively going forward. The farm will switch to all autumn calving, with a 10- to 12-week calving spread starting in late July, with approximately 100 suckler cows being the target. This will allow all under 16-month bulls to be finished prior to Christmas and heifers to be finished in the second season at grass.

Tillage land on the home block will be reseeded with grass to facilitate the move to all autumn calving.

“Calving spread can be an issue where there is split calving, so we will slightly reduce cow numbers which will allow me to cull poorer performers and be more ruthless when it comes to bull removal,” says Debbie.

Dairy

When asked would she consider dairy farming, Debbie’s immediate answer

with a wry smile is ‘No!’. She clearly has a passion for beef breeding, which can be seen as her face lights up when discussing breeding policies, replacement bull strategies, etc. The obvious empathy and appreciation she has for suckler cows as she herds and checks the animals daily proves that her chosen career path was absolutely the right one.

Family support

Debbie’s dad Fred is the current boss and his dad, Sydney, is always there in the background to help out and offer advice. It’s fantastic to see them working together as a family unit; all bringing their own experience and levels of enthusiasm when it comes to decision-making. But while everyone gets an equal say, Debbie is becoming increasingly more involved in decision making on the farm as she gradually takes up the reins from the father.

targeted at keeping fat covers on the right side of 2+ is fed.

All calves are weighed two to three times each year prior to weaning to monitor cow and calf performance

and highlight any issues. Gains of 1.3kg and 1.1kg/day are expected on the bull and heifer calves respectively. Finishing heifers get similar treatment.