



by Steve Martin

Constantly on the coaching hot seat

THE world is full of teams.

Although some efforts in life are strictly individual, many accomplishments are achieved in some type of team environment. Perhaps this is one of the reasons why American culture is so interested in sports – and is why taking a few minutes to look at the process involved in successful team sports might offer ideas for building a team to manage a successful dairy operation.

When considering the management structure of a modern dairy, the owner, manager, other employees, vet, nutritionist and cows truly make a nice analogy to a sports team. The role that each of these people or groups plays in the team has a lot to do with its potential success.

When thinking of football teams as an analogy for my clients' dairies, I often see myself as perhaps an offensive coordinator or position coach. In keeping with that theme, the herd health veterinarian feels a lot like the defensive coordinator.

The game-time management accomplished by football coaches is certainly more intense than deciding how to manage and feed cows, but the stakes are high for both groups. The chemistry between them is important too. The goals, the process and the style of the relationship need to be in a comfort zone for all members. These dynamics differ from place to place, and not every nutritionist will fit in at every dairy, no matter how smart and talented they may be. At the end of the day, dairying is a cow business and a people business. Both need to be a good fit.

In the dairy industry, the turnover of nutrition consultants is common, not unlike football coaches. Furthermore, as the U.S. dairy industry continues to consolidate, there will likely be fewer of them. No matter whether it is hallway conversation at a dairy meeting or between two folks over coffee, the job security of dairy nutrition consultants seems to be a topic of great interest.

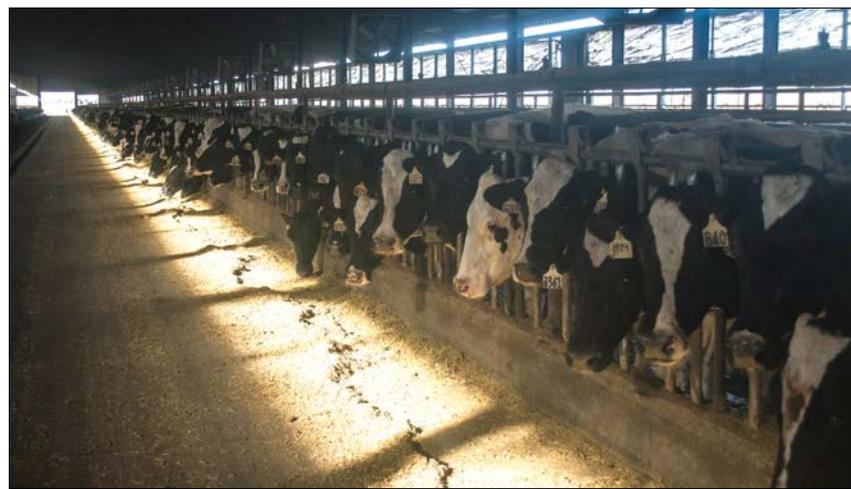
Success in results

How can nutritionists contribute more quality guidance and deliver additional value to dairies? With

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football coaches, the process for success involves recruiting top players, building a strong staff, and lots of hard work. Success in results is the final measure, not success in the process. As nutritionists work to influence the performance of a dairy farm, there is also a process in place to insure adequate performance.

In football there is offense, defense and special teams. In dairy nutrition there are also three phases of the game: feed ingredients, cows and people. A successful nutritionist will first understand the details of all feed ingredients available from the standpoint of quality, nutrient content and economic value. Then, using a strong formulation model, he or she will correctly blend them to maximize milk flow, cow health and



dairy profitability.

The second phase is relating to the people who are involved. It includes everyone from the ingredient buyer to the night guy on the pushup tractor. The two most important people in this group are the owner/manager and the feeder. There must be good buy-in from the owner/manager and he or she must be on the same page with the formulation approach used by the nutritionist. This is one of the key relationships on the entire dairy and it is critical for success.

Relating to feeders is also important and it takes different forms at different dairies. There are some feeders who I phone or text regularly. At other farms it is more of an interpreter-aided relationship. Included in this is management of on-farm software to insure accurate feeding. An understanding of feed delivery schedules, silage face management, dry mater testing and the like are

all critical. It is often not the easiest function for a nutritionist to relate well to the feeder, but it is important.

The third phase for the nutritionist is the cows. Spending time with them is important, and is a process that can take many forms. It might be a "boots in the pen" walk, or maybe a drive-around look. The goal is to assess things like body condition, manure health, cud chewing, cow comfort, TMR condition, water availability and pen conditions. The results of rations that are in place can be somewhat evaluated by the "eye test." Also included in this phase is records analysis and metrics. Adding these more objective numerical measures helps confirm or challenge the results of the eye test.

As the role of the nutritionist con-

tinues to evolve in a changing industry, it will be good for them to migrate closer to a well-documented scientific approach. There is too much smoke and mirrors feel in this profession. The art of feeding cows will never go away, but we now have better and more accurate tools to lean on in the science and math parts of the process.

At this point in the progression of nutritional science, every ration change should be supported by a sound formulation model. At the same time, we can never ignore our good cow sense while trusting the biology in the model. If all the inputs are correct, the intended results will most likely follow.

Professional accreditation

Efforts are afoot in the nutrition community to bring standards to professionals in animal agriculture. The American Registry of Professional Animal Scientists (ARPAS) is help-

ing to bring standards to the profession. The goal is to offer credentials to various professional functions. If you see the letters "PAS" after an individual's name, it means they have met the requirements set by ARPAS for a particular area of specialization.

Back to football for one last point: according to *Forbes* magazine, there are at least 20 college football programs that have annual revenues of between \$50 and \$100 million per year! That is where the high pressure on coaches comes from; football is a big business.

How does this apply to a modern dairy? Football administrators and coaches are asked to make investments in items like bigger stadiums, upgraded practice facilities, and top-notch assistant coaches. The expected financial return is driven by winning football games. Similarly, a dairy management team is tasked with investing in facilities to improve cow comfort, growing and buying feed ingredients that have high milk production potential, and hiring people with a high level of competence to work with the cows.

The investment and potential return are high in both examples.

Using a moderate value of \$17 milk and 10.5 cents per pound of dry matter feed cost, a 2,500-cow dairy has annual gross revenues in excess of \$11 million and a feed bill of over \$5 million. This doesn't quite meet the scale of a football program at a major university, but there is no denying these are big budgets. How does the nutritionist fit into this cash flow picture? In a sense, the owner of a 2,500-cow dairy is asking the nutritionist to invest \$5 million wisely to gain the highest return possible.

In today's dairy environment where some individual farms milk 5,000 cows or more, the nutritionist is calling plays for more than \$10 million in feed bills. That should give you pause. And from the viewpoint of the nutritionist, if he works for several dairies of varying sizes, he might be managing as much as \$50 million in annual feed dollars.

That gives me pause! The point is that dairy feed dollar totals are big and what we all do as team members is important. As for the nutritionist's role, increased professionalism will help insure that we are truly feeding for the bottom line.