

Spotlight Sale Tent too Reserve National Champion: a conversation with MAR-RAN DAIRY

By Kevin W. Kinney

When and how did you start in dairy goats?

We started the same as many others in the dairy goat industry, as a 4-H project. In 1993 our oldest daughter wanted to show a dairy heifer. Randy grew up on a dairy farm and had cleaned his share of calf pens.

We really didn't want a heifer, that two years later would be a milking cow, so we looked into goats. A young woman in our 4-H club was going to college and wanted to sell her Registered Alpine does. So we bought two bred milking does. We have 6 children, who were all at home at the time, so we thought they could show the goats at the fair, and we could sure use the milk!

How has that 4H Project Changed your life?

Only one of those two original does ever produced doe kids. She did very well at our county fair winning Champion several times. Someone suggested we try an "open" show, but we didn't even know what an open show was! In 1995 we showed at two AGDA shows, did fairly well, and caught the "show bug". For the next 11 years every animal we had went back to that original doe. In 2006 we attended the ADGA Convention in Milwaukee. While walking through the Spotlight Sale tent Mary noticed an Alpine doe from the Nodaway herd. Mary liked her style and strength, and I liked her pedigree. We decided we would try and buy her at the sale. We had seen Nodaway's website, and had some Nodaway lines in our own pedigrees. We were lucky enough to be able to purchase "Nodaway SGG Raya's Rapture", and she has changed our life!! She is the foundation of our current show line of beautiful Alpines. We are truly honored to own her, and so grateful to Waldman's that they chose to put her into the Spotlight Sale. We have shared with them every win she has earned. In all the years we've been showing goats, Rapture is the only doe we have purchased other than our original two animals. Every other doe we have in our show herd is our own breeding.

How did you get started in the commercial dairy business?

Randy grew up on a cow dairy farm, and his dream was to continue that tradition. However, life sometimes throws a curve ball at you, and after farming for a couple of years in the early 80's, we had to sell out and Randy went to work in town. He always dreamed of getting back into dairy farming, and after we had been involved in showing goats for several years he was able to return with the commercial goat dairy.

How do you manage the commercial herd?

We have approximately 250 – 300 head of goats in our herd. We milk 200 to 225 does when everyone is fresh. However, we would like to increase that number to 250. When we went commercial, we were very fortunate to be able to purchase an entire herd from a friend of ours. So, we have never had the health issues that many people do when they are attempting to dramatically increase their herd size by buying animals from different herds. We raise all of our own replacement does, and only buy new herd sires, when necessary. We have had our commercial herd for four years. We initially rented the barn from our friend, but built a barn and parlor at home 2 years ago. The show herd and commercial herd are housed and raised together.

The milking herd is housed in a large barn and divided into 3 groups, based on production and age. All our goats are fed a pellet type feed, 18% protein for the milkers and 20% for the young stock. We feed top quality alfalfa balelage with a moisture content of 30% to 45%.

Our primary breeds in the milking herd are Alpines, and Alpine- Saanen cross does. The herd, when we purchased it, was primarily Alpine but we added a Saanen buck as one of our commercial herd sires for 2 years. We have Alpines, LaManchas and Alpine-LaMancha Recorded Grades in the show herd.

Do you bottle milk, make cheese or sell your milk?

We ship our milk to MonteChevre in Belmont, Wisconsin. MonteChevre makes many kinds of award winning, cheeses and yogurt, and we are happy to be part of their team.

What is a typical day at the dairy?

A typical day, of course starts with milking followed by all the daily chores. Mary works off the farm, at one of the local high schools, as an Athletic Director/ Assistant Principal Secretary. Because she needs to be at work by 7:30 am, not smelling like the barn, she is unable to help with morning milking or chores. She has AI'd a doe, or helped with a difficult delivery before heading off to work, but those are the exceptions. Her co-workers have no idea what she might have been doing at home before coming into work. They really have no idea! The "no smelly hair" rule does not apply once she gets home from work, so she is out helping with evening chores, which can take as long as three hours depending on the number of kids to be fed. Fitting dinner into the schedule, during peak kidding times, is a challenge. Mary does the kid rearing, is the AI technician, and the on-site OB and Veterinarian. Randy has the responsibility of the daily running and managing of the farm.

How do you manage all those does and all those kids?

Late winter/early spring is the worse, with all the babies to feed and care for. We sell buck kids as soon as possible after birth. We only keep doe kids from dams that produce at herd average or above (we are on DHI testing). All kids are pulled from their dams as soon as possible. Buck kids receive colostrum, however all doe kids are fed a colostrum replacer for two feedings. There is just not enough time to pasteurize that much colostrum! Third feeding is a top quality milk replacer. With 75 to 120 kids, feeding can take a few hours. The milking herd is divided into three groups based on production and age. We try to keep 1st and 2nd fresheners together, and then mature does are grouped by production. We freshen 60 to 70 yearlings a year. We cull approximately 30% of the herd a year, based on production and health. Everyone has to pay their way, even the show herd. We pen the kids in groups of five until they are weaned. This makes it easier to closely watch them for signs of illness and stress. Once the kids are weaned they are put into larger groups. The commercial doe kids we are keeping are given an ear tag that corresponds to their dam. The show kids are initially given a collar with the name of their dam written on it. Mary keeps records of the breeding date and buck used, so using the doe's name is an easy way to keep them identified until they are tattooed and registered.

How did you decide on the Alpine breed?

We started with Alpines because that was the breed of the two original does we purchased as a 4-H project. We had not given it too much thought at the time, these were the goats that were available. We thought they were pretty and they did really well at the fair, so we bought them. Neither of us had any experience with goats, so we really can't give ourselves any credit for researching herds and pedigrees before we made that decision. In our inexperience we initially listened to the wrong advice on breeding, and lost ground on our first couple of generations of kids. But once we were introduced to the open show circuit, we realized the importance of a breeding plan to improve your herd. We had alpines, and knew we would always have them, so we started researching the pedigrees of our own does, and watching who was winning on the show circuit.

What lines were people working with when you started and how did that influence you?

Our original does were locally bred. When we started looking at what lines we wanted to work with, we knew we wanted strong powerful does with level top lines, and long, wide, level rumps. We get a little crazy about top lines and rumps, but it's what we always heard judges complement our does for having, and we wanted to continue that trait. We watched who was winning in the show ring with the same type of does we wanted. Mary would sit at ringside with a note book and listen to the judge giving reasons. She would write down the reasons the judge gave for those animals at the top of the line, and what the judge said needed improvement in our does. At one of those very first open shows she heard the judge talk about escutcheons, and mention the height and width of them in the does standing at the top of the line. She went to Randy and said, "We need better escutcheons. I'm not sure what they are, but I need to find out, because we need higher and wider ones." This was the rudimentary start to our breeding program. The local herds that were always at the top of their classes were Vance, Kickapoo Valley, Crazy Hollow, and Sunshine. We also had Nodaway in the pedigrees of our original two does. Those were the herds that we wanted to emulate, and those were the herds we first looked to when purchasing a buck.

Over the years how have you seen the breed evolve?

In the Alpine breed, like the other dairy breeds, there has been an evolution in a number of areas. Udders have evolved from being more pendulous to having higher, wider rear udder attachments, more extension to the fore udder, and a better area of attachment. Top lines have straightened out, with wider, more level rumps being more desirable. An off-set cannon bone, that has been common in the Alpine Breed, is not as prevalent any more. We are also seeing a more desirable set to the legs, with more curvature to the rear leg, and stronger pasterns.

What is your process on selecting a new buck?

After our purchase of Rapture we decided we really wanted to start "building" the type of goats we wanted with her. We had a long talk with John White years ago and he talked with us about "line-breeding". We understood his thinking on the idea, and have tried to build our doe lines that way. For us, we like bucks from families that pass traits on generation after generation. A family line, which produces our style of goat year after year. We don't get excited by a buck that is "hot" this year; let's see what happens with those hot bucks in a few years. We spend a lot of time on the ADGA Planned Pedigree site. Planning breeding's with different bucks to see how that pedigree looks and who the contributors to that pedigree will be. One of the best and most exciting tools we have is AI. Mary took a class in 2007, and we had our first AI babies the next spring. The conception rate we have with AI averages 80%. Being able to successfully AI enables us to bring in bloodlines, and sires, that otherwise would be unavailable to us. For the commercial herd we look at milk records, period! We want to see milk records of 3,500lbs or more for at least 2 generations, on both sides of the pedigree.

What lines are you currently working with and how are they shaping your herd?

We like the style of goats in herds like Redwood Hills, Tempo Aquila, Nodaway and Sunshine. These are the lines we are working with and look for bucks with strong ties to these lines. We are very lucky that Rapture crosses well with several different lines. She has blessed us with eight daughters, all sired with the four lines listed above. These daughters and granddaughters have been bred to bucks that also have these bloodlines in their pedigrees. This breeding's have produced the type of animals we want; tall, long, strong goats with level top lines, wide rumps and correct mammary systems. We are using some Hoach bloodlines in our breeding program this year, and have gotten some exciting kids. We like to breed goats that will be in the parlor and show ring for many years.

In the commercial herd we use mainly Mamm-Key bloodlines. We find these genetics have the drive and willingness to milk. We have several does with 305 records of 3,500 to 4,000 lbs. We keep a buck kid each year out of our top producing doe, and buy a new buck every other year for the commercial herd. We

also use some of our “show line” bucks on a few does in the commercial herd. This gives us an idea of what traits they will pass on to their offspring with a broader array of genetics.

Do you see any differences in French or American?

We don't understand the whole French – American debate, we breed what we like. We have heard people say “you will lose those genetics”. How are they lost? They are still in the pedigree. If a buck will improve our does, we don't care if he is American or French.

The American Alpines do seem to be larger and stronger type goats, yet still they display the dairyness we are looking for in the Alpine breed. You cannot deny the input some American Alpines have had on the breed. With great does and bucks like; Milar-Farm Royal Image, Redwood Hills RememberJambalya, Tempo Aquila Tetrizzini, Sodium Oaks Sasin, Tempo Aquila Freelance, all great animals!

With the lines we are working with, breeding “French only” is somewhat limited. We have both French and American, but do not necessarily breed accordingly. We breed what we think will work best with that doe. We do want to keep our French line going so we have both registered American and French bucks. We do breed our French does to French bucks because some breeders want only French offspring. Our Rapture family is French, however we have bred Rapture to American bucks as well as French bucks. A buck must fit into our breeding plans first, French or American makes very little difference to us.

What do you see as strength and weakness of Alpines?

We love our Alpines. They are very strong milkers, hardy, resilient, and long living. We also love our LaManchas, however the Alpines in our herd are, overall, much better producers. The top Alpines out there today, seem to be does who excel in size and stature, dairy character, with strong productive mummery systems, and are strong on their feet and legs. These are the traits that the Alpine breeders have been working for. As a commercial producer we would like a higher protein and fat component in the milk produced by our Alpines.

What should breeders be working towards, correcting, adding to the breed?

We've seen breeders whose line has strength, but has lost femininity, and we've seen breeders whose does are very dairy and beautiful, but don't have enough strength or depth of body.

A few of the things that as breeders we need to breed for are strength combined with dairy character and femininity, increased milk production with better udder attachments, depth of heart girth and angularity, strong feet and legs. As well as wide level rumps that makes kidding easier.

2013 was a good year for you; tell us about your national show experiences?

We had a very exciting year in 2013. The 2013 National Show was the third National Show we've been able to attend. We brought seven Alpines to St. Paul, four milkers and three kids. Three of our milkers stood second in their class, and the fourth one stood fifth. The kids placed third, fourth and eleventh.

Sometimes we look at each other and say, ‘we had three does in the championship line up at the National Show, and can you believe it?’ It's still so surreal when we think about it. Of course we were so excited and honored to have Rapture win Reserve National Champion. It was so thrilling for us, and for Richard and Ricca Waldman.

At our first National show in 2008 we brought five Alpines and just wanted to make the cut; which we did with all of them but one. We watched and could only imagine what it would be like to be standing in first or second place, and wishing that someday that just might be us. So this year to be standing within the top five with all of our milking does but one, and have three in the championship lineup competing for Reserve, is beyond any of our hopes and expectations.

Rapture's 5 year old daughter, CH MAR-RAN's Carolina Rayne went on to win Best Doe in Show and Best Udder in Show at both the 2013 Wisconsin and Minnesota State Fairs. That was also so exciting! In 2012 Rapture was the Best Doe in Show at the Wisconsin State Fair. We have had Best of Breed Alpine and been Premier Alpine Breeder at the Wisconsin State Fair the past three years in a row. We are proud to say we have been able to do this with only purchasing two does in 20 years. We are proud of the hardiness of our does; these are "working goats". As we said earlier, mature does and kids in the show string are housed and raised the same as our commercial does and kids. Kids are penned in groups of 5 to 10 and are fed milk replacer like everyone else. Yearlings are in groups of 30 to 50. The milking does are penned in groups of 60 to 80 does. No one receives special treatment just because you are or were a champion. Even Rapture, after winning Res. at Nationals returned to her group of 70 other milking does when we got home from Nationals.

Has your herd been Linear Appraised?

We have never had our herd Linear Appraised. We would like to someday, however for us it is not an expense we can justify at this time. Our does have proven their worth to us in both the show ring and the milking parlor.

If you could start over would you do anything different?

If we were to start over, I'm not sure we could have done anything differently? We were raising six children at the time, and Mary was at home with them, so spending money buying fancy does or expensive bucks was not an option. Simply, we had to breed up to the level we wanted to be at. We have enjoyed watching our herd improve over the years. The Wisconsin State Fair pays 14 places, and in our first years exhibiting there Mary would sit in the stands, and while our children were showing, and she would count the placing's of our does. We just wanted to be in the money, to help off-set the cost of entries, most of the time we were in the top 14, but not always. It was fun to watch our does move up the line over the years. This is a memory our older children talk about when they come back to the State Fair and watch us now standing at or near the top. Our success today means so much more to us, because we've worked hard over many years to build the herd we have.

Having goats as our children were growing up was so much fun! Not only were they a great family project, but our children learned so many valuable life lessons from the experience. They learned the value of a good work ethic, how to be gracious winners, and gracious losers. They learned about breeding, birth, and dying. We all worked together, which cemented the family ties, and also taught them how to be team players. And they learned to share and support each other. The value of the experience was immeasurable, and we really wouldn't change a thing.

What advice would you give people just starting their own caprine adventure?

The advice we always give new breeders looking to start a show herd, is to purchase the best quality animal that you can afford. They will become the foundation of your future herd. Go to an ADGA show and watch different breeders and their goats. Visit several breeders; get a feel for the type of goat you are looking for. Talk with the breeders that have been breeding quality animals for several years. Don't only listen to breeders talk about themselves, but listen to what others are saying about them and their animals.

If you are looking to start a commercial herd, be sure you know what is involved in this venture. Visit commercial dairies to see their set up, and talk to them about all aspects of their business. Find out about the day to day running of a dairy. A commercial dairy is far more labor intensive than most people realize. Finding someone to do chores for you when you have a half dozen milkers is not the same as finding

someone qualified to substitute for you with a commercial herd of several hundred. Kidding season can put strain on even the most sane goat enthusiast. To raise a dozen kids is not the same as raising a hundred. Having 15 to 25 kids born a day for several days in a row is not unusual. Learn how to properly raise kids, as these are the future of your herd. Learn how and what to feed your milking does for top production. We have seen people buy cheap feed and complain about low production. You have to buy quality feed and feed it correctly, to produce the most milk. Buy animals from a reputable commercial breeder, and look at DHI records. If you think you can buy a herd cheaply and breed better animals over the next several years, remember that the herd you buy will need to start paying the bills right away, not several years from now.