

Rooted in the ring: A family tradition three generations strong



Zoe Geary

The McGrath family, who have been showing in the **Cork Summer Show** since the 1980s, are gearing up for another year and hopefully more rosettes.

The McGraths have a 200-strong pedigree Holstein herd on the home farm in Cloyne, East Cork. The herd is managed by Michael McGrath, the family patriarch, alongside his wife, Sheila, and one of his sons, Tom. His daughter Michelle, who is trained as a vet with Animal Health Ireland, assists with the showing and milking during busy times of year. The grandkids and Tom's wife Maria also help out wherever they are needed on the farm.

A second farm with 150 more cows is managed by the McGrath's other son, Michael, who is helped by his wife Catherine and their children.

"It is a family affair and a team effort," explained Michelle.

Michael began showing in the **Cork Summer Show** in 1988 with the cow 'Candy', who gave them a taste for showing life and got Michael, his kids, and now his grandkids positively hooked. Although Mr McGrath said they were "fairly green" at their first show, they got good results and "got to know a lot of like-minded people, and we found this a good social occasion."

Talking to Mr McGrath's daughter, Michelle McGrath, who started showing in the late 1990s following her parents' lead, with the help of family friend Billy Deane, who would pitch in wherever he could.

"Our parents were very into shows and liked getting us out every week. When we were young, we used to bring calves



From left: Cathal Murphy, Michelle McGrath, Michael McGrath, and Munster Agricultural Society president Gerard Murphy.

and they'd bring a couple of cows as well," Michelle recalled fondly.

"It was a good way of getting us interested in farming, and meeting people was kind of healthy. Showing was also good for getting us to do a bit of work on the farm too," Michelle said, mirroring a sentiment brought forward by her father, who said the kids have to "help out with the training of the calves" if they wanted to participate in any showing.

Alongside the training, Michael's grandkids also have a rota in place for calf feeding and general management of the calves.

"You need them [the kids] to be honest. It is a lot of work preparing on the day and the build-up... and it's a really good way for the children to get involved in the future of

farming. I think it's important," said Michelle.

Last year the McGrath's won first place in the Pedigree Holstein Friesian cow in milk having had two or more calves, second in the Pedigree Holstein Friesian Heifer in milk, first in the Champion

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and reserve champion Holstein Friesian and received the prize for best pair of Pedigree Holstein Friesian owned and bred by exhibitor.

This year, Mr McGrath explained that "three or four of the grandkids would probably be interested" in the showing. Prospects for their cows, however, have experienced a bit of a bump in the road as one of the family's favourite cows, tipped to be showing this year, had a difficult calving. Mr McGrath has decided not to show her and instead give her a quiet summer for a bit of R&R. Not to worry though, as he explained they still have a "couple of possibilities to bring", in an attempt to recreate last year's success in this year's show.

Both McGraths highlighted

the value of the **Cork Summer Show** as a social occasion.

"Well, I suppose it's not very exciting, just slaving away at home every day, meeting nobody. It's a pretty lonely life, really," explained Mr McGrath.

"At the Cork show now, we meet friends and neighbours there, and you know, because they think we're a bit mad, I'm sure, sometimes with the amount of hours we put into all this. It is hard work, but it's worth it, I think," Michelle said.

It's not all work, however. Michelle and her kids love attending the show as a whole, with Michelle saying it feels more like a festival event. Fitted in around the showing, the McGraths love the **Cork Summer Show** as a family day out, "we meet friends there

and we would get something to eat after listening to the music. It kind of has everything there."

Michelle also highlighted the cultural importance of the show for the agricultural sector. "I do think it's important that the non-farming people get to see all the hard work farmers put into rearing cows and producing food for them, because a lot of them would never get to experience it otherwise. It is very important from that aspect as well," she said.

This year, the **Cork Summer Show** will span the weekend of June 14 to 15 in the showgrounds at Curraheen, and you can catch the McGrath family in action in the cattle ring on the Saturday in the Pedigree Holstein Friesian classes.