



Dr. Robert Everett

“How can you be more fortunate than to have the opportunity to have a job in which you’re anxious to go to work every day?”

By Melanie Soberon
01/15/2010

An Interview with Robert Everett, Professor Emeritus of Cornell Animal Science By: *Melanie Soberon*

Around 10am on any given morning in Morrison Hall, a group of Animal Science professors, some retired and some active, gather around a coffeepot to maintain a routine that has been vital to their careers over the years – the exchange of ideas. As the coffee brews, they might discuss the experimental design of a study in the works or they may argue about nutritional or physiological concepts, but when they all return to their offices at 11am, they are usually still pondering the well-spoken viewpoints of the others.

This notion of exchanging ideas and being willing to hash them out with someone else that holds a different perspective has long been a tradition in the Department of Animal Science, upheld by its weekly seminars. Not only has it proven a valuable aspect of the friendship between two coffee break participants, Robert (Bob) Everett and John Murray Elliot, but it has admittedly been this type of communication that has shaped the individual thinking and ‘unorthodox ideas’ responsible for Everett’s impact in the dairy industry. Throughout his career, Everett has been dedicated to the mission of animal science, which he states is actually to work for the consumers.

“We, as animal scientists, in fact, operate with the producer but the ultimate effect is that it’s the consumer who benefits. For example, new technologies like bST that are developed - the first producers to use bST do make more profit but then everyone receives the opportunity to use bST, so no farmer got an increase in net income relative to his neighbor from the use of bST. They all had the opportunity to use it and no farmer had the advantage over another farmer, leaving the consumer as the one who benefits ultimately and forever. That’s exactly what the department mission is about.”

Sharing with others his insights and research is nothing new to Everett. Beyond his extension work, he also taught an International Agriculture class for 27 years and supervised numerous graduate students.

“To me the important question is ‘How are you gonna make a living?’ ” said Everett. “To me, it boils down to that and basically that’s what I asked students. I also believe that you have to let them go in many different directions to find out what’s what. I think one of the most stimulating things about when I came to Cornell was that students could take any courses – the highest level courses in the University - if that’s what they wanted to do. We need young people to think outside of the box and we certainly don’t encourage it by putting them all in the same box. It’s always a lot of fun to see students in Animal Science take courses in medical school. They’d be dabbling here and there all

across the university and still meet the requirements to graduate and be their own people, thinking for themselves, and that was a really unique plus for the university.”

Everett was raised on a dairy farm in New Jersey, and later attended the National Agricultural College, now known as Delaware Valley College in Doylestown, PA. He acquired his masters and PhD degrees at Michigan State University and then moved to Cornell University in 1966 to begin a postdoc. In 1968, he was hired as an assistant professor to work in research and extension in dairy cattle genetics.

Elliot, a professor emeritus as well as retired department chair recalls when Everett arrived in the department as a research associate in 1966 to work in animal breeding, “I came here in 1960 so I was here before he arrived. When Bob arrived, he had a position which involved the Dairy Records Processing Lab (DRPL) which used to be the operation in the basement of Morrison Hall with the big computer that processed all the records for the DHI (Dairy Herd Improvement) program. He was a postdoc but was working mostly on the records, using them as a source of data to develop models, etc.”

Perhaps it was the farm-raised work ethic kicking in, but it wasn't long before Everett was going above and beyond his duties. Described as a natural businessman by those who know him, Everett put these skills to use when he assumed leadership of the New York Dairy Herd Improvement Cooperative described in *Animal Science at Cornell University, 1963-2000: Observations and Reflections of an Insider* by John Murray Elliot as “headquartered in Morrison Hall, financially troubled and without adequate leadership. For about eight months, on an interim basis, he assumed leadership of the organization, reorganized the financial management, renegotiated loans, downsized the personnel, and put the business on a sound footing before turning it over to a newly hired manager. This experience undoubtedly contributed to his close association with dairy records research and extension thereafter.”

On a side note, Elliot explains, “For many, many years, Bob has had a strong interest in the stock market and business in general. We would get a lot of advice from him on this and that because he's knowledgeable about these sorts of things. For a long time, his newspaper was the Wall Street Journal – I think it's now the Economist. Beyond his general business interest, he's very strongly interested in the business aspects of the dairy industry. He had different views about a lot of things, so hence a lot of friendly arguments. When he first came, we used to get into lots of arguments but these were friendly arguments, even though some of the other people in the department didn't realize that. Bob and I took advantage of that and had a lot fun with it.”

These friendly arguments represented Everett's willingness to go against the grain of popular thinking when his research said otherwise, fitting with his philosophy that “people who make the big advances in society are just people who think outside of the box.”

“Bob tried to educate the general public to do what he felt on the basis of research was the correct thing to do in terms of selection of sires. He wasn't always popular in the field but he had a lot of progressive producers who worked very closely with him,” said Elliot.

As Everett's career took off, he focused not only on accurate sire selection methods, but also on how to increase the profitability of dairy farms, always in strong demand as an advisor to progressive, college-trained commercial producers, who were subsequently rewarded with status as leaders in the NY dairy industry.

Everett also worked very closely with the Eastern AI organization (Eastern Artificial Insemination Cooperative, now known as Genex) and became well-known in animal breeding circles, contributing not only to this country with his promotion of techniques for selecting sires, but also in foreign countries such as Mexico.

“For years and years, Bob made a separate sire list ranking the bulls used in the Northeast independently of all the organizations that were involved in making similar lists. And he always worked very hard to use and promote methods that would give the NE an edge over the rest of the country. This NE Sire Evaluation, which at one time, the Eastern AI Organization promoted, supported and used, did give a substantial advantage to producers in the NE,” said Elliot.

Everett's techniques led to the development of a group of progressive producers called the Advanced Dairy Genetics group. This group was one of the first to use and promote sexed semen, which is now available to all producers. Everett consulted the group and kept records for them, running models on the data he acquired.

One of Everett's most notable inventions is the Test Day Model (TDM). The purpose of the Test Day Model is to allow comparisons of animals that have been raised under different environmental and management scenarios by standardizing those effects. The TDM considers the production of all the animals in a given farm on a given test day to estimate deviations from the average once the biological effects like days pregnant or days since calving have been accounted for. For instance, the season in which a cow calves can potentially alter her milk production – generally, heat stress causes lower milk production. Therefore, to accurately compare one cow's production with another cow's, the variation in milk production that was due to the season in which she calved must be accounted for. The TDM accounts for this variation among others. The TDM is also the tool Everett uses to assemble his genetic sire lists.

“The Test Day Model is a way of using data to document everything that's going on in a dairy operation,” said Everett. “In 1980, the Director of the Dairy Processing Lab, Lyle Wadell, was talking about setting up a system where the data tells us what to do. It took a long time – in fact, it took 14 years. I thought I had it exactly the way I wanted it probably in the late 1980s and then never really got it the way I wanted until about 1994 when it was patented.”

The TDM allows for genetic evaluations of animals from farm to farm, whether they are in the same county or a different state.

“The way the TDM is set up, it doesn't matter when you collect the data or how frequently you collect the data – it could be every 3 months or every other day or

randomly – it just evaluates the data to produce evaluations of the management system or genetic evaluations,” said Everett.

The TDM is a tool that can allow farmers to evaluate their own management practices, technology use and genetic improvements to increase their profitability and performance. “The goal is that anyone that wants to have access to the TDM can have it,” Everett said.

“I really like what I did – I really enjoyed my work and that’s why I’m still here. People say, ‘you’re retired, why are you coming into work?’ and it’s because I really like what I do,” said Everett. “I would say that the most satisfying thing is to have a problem that you think about when you fall asleep at night and you’re anxious to go to work the next day to work on it. How can you be more fortunate than to have the opportunity to have a job in which you’re anxious to go to work every day...to me that’s the most satisfying part.”