A.J. Quist Memorial Young Breeder Award

By Kathleen O’Keefe

The 2017 California Young Breeder award winners are well-known to California Holstein Association members. They took similar paths in their youth - being active in the show ring through 4-H, active in sports, pursuing secondary degrees all while maintaining their love for the registered dairy cow. Adam and Lacey Van Exel of Lodi, CA, have continued to share that passion with others though the show ring, judging, helping with the state sale, state show and other events. While they don’t seek the spotlight, their continuing efforts to assist in organizations and events away from their dairy have made them key players in the state purebred business.

Adam, 36, grew up on his family’s operation, Van Exel Dairy in Lodi, CA, home of Exels Holsteins and Jerseys. Very active in 4-H and sports as a youth, he graduated from Lodi High School in 2000 and went on to attend Modesto Junior College. At MJC, he pursued the challenge of post-secondary dairy judging to great success as he was a member of the team that placed 2nd at World Dairy Expo in 2002 and 1st at NAILE, where he was the 2nd high individual. After graduation, Adam returned home and began working at the dairy.

Lacey, 33, discovered an early love for the show ring as she exhibited her first dairy animal when she was eight years old. A graduate of Gustine High School, she was also active in 4-H and sports. Like Adam, she also continued her judging career at the next level when she enrolled at Cal Poly, a university with a prestigious dairy judging program. Lacey was a member of the team that placed in the top five at NAILE in 2004 and in the top ten at World Dairy Expo in 2005. While earning her Dairy Science degree at Cal Poly, she was active in the Los Lecheros Dairy Club, participated in the Dairy Challenge and Western Bonanza before graduating in 2005. She worked at USDA and a local winery before becoming full-time part of the dairy in 2007.

Adam now oversees the dairy operation and the grape fields, while Lacey maintains the cow records and manages the calves and ET work done at the farm. She also takes the lead role in looking after the show heifers, which are kept in a small barn behind their house.

They knew each other from showing cows over the years, but really started connecting at a California Holstein Convention about 14 years ago where Lacey won a door prize - a Black & Decker stub finder. Seeing no use for it in her life, she gave it to the overjoyed guy sitting next to her…and the rest is history. “I will tell you that the stub finder was right on the money - that thing led her to a life long stud!”, laughs Adam. They began dating and eventually were married in 2006. Now the parents of three children - Madison (7), Atlee (6), and Henry (1) - they have seen ups and downs, like most married couples. “We aren’t always walking on sunshine. I believe you have to work on your relationship and hash out the bigger problems, while letting the little ones roll off. But throughout the clouds and rain, those struggles let you see how far you’ve come and grown together. It makes you appreciate the sunny days more because you know how much you did together to get to them’, explains Adam.

Both Adam and Lacey credit Mike Deaver as being an important mentor while they were learning the ropes in the show ring. “For me, growing up with mostly grade cattle on our small farm, my parents would purchase calves for me at purebred sales and that’s how we got to know Mike. He was the one that pointed our family in the right direction. He taught me what to feed, how to grow hair, etc.,” notes Lacey. Adam agrees about the importance of Mike’s input. “Mike was a big influence on me too. He was one of the best fitters and always took time to teach me something. He always encouraged me to try things that I didn’t think I was able to do, out of fear or not knowing how,“ Adam also credits Joey Airosa for a steady hand in his life. “Joey has always been there since I can remember going to the bigger shows. As my father’s friend, he had to ride the fence line of being hard on me and also giving me that kind word when things weren’t going so good. He was always that calming voice in the back of my head and could make me laugh even at the worst situations!”

The reputation of quality registered cattle carrying the Exels prefix is well-known, but Adam and Lacey have a couple individual cows that are particular favorites. One is Will-Tattoo Lacey EX-91, a Goldwyn daughter owned with Will & Amy lager that won the CA State Holstein Futurity in 2012. The second is their favorite Jersey, Whitney Oaks K Beth EX-93, a cow that has made her name in the show ring as Grand Champion of the CA Jersey Spring Show in 2015, as well as placing 2nd in the Senior 3-Year-Old class at World Dairy Expo and being named ABA Reserve All-American Senior 3-Year-Old in 2014.

Breeding the next generation of good ones is an ongoing challenge as genomics continues to change the industry. “When we are looking for ‘show bulls’, we are dealing with a very small selection. A few years ago there were 20-25 bulls that could fill that niche, but now it seems there are only 3-4 bulls that fit that mold” notes Adam. Rapidly changing sire lineups are another challenge. “Then you start with the production side of the equation and what is your preference? Milk? DPR? Fat? GTP? SCS? NMS? There are so many things that uniquely qualify these bulls, it makes your job very tough to glean what bull will throw the real traits we are looking for. We have a new hot bull every three or four months and with the rapid sire turnover just in the time of a cow’s gestation period, it makes hard to assess these bulls completely.”

They love farming in California, but acknowledge the state is making dairying more and more difficult. “The state is making it hard to want to dairy here, so the number of cows is probably going to get smaller. But where you have people that work as hard as dairymen do, there will always be a passion for cows. I hope that we can keep up the level of competition that we have seen at our state show these last couple of years. It has been great seeing people that are new to showing really dive into it and do it the right way with the assistance of people that know and care about cows”, Adam states.

In spite of the challenges in the Holstein business and in dairying, both Adam and Lacey love their life on the farm. “Five and ten years from now, we want a healthy family where the kids are free to chase their passions, what ever they want to do. If their passion is for the dairy, we want them to go work for someone else AFTER they finishing college with a business degree. An important part of future success in dairying will be having your nose in the books and making sure things look good to the bank”, observes Adam.

On good days and bad, Adam and Lacey, like most dairy producers, feel raising their kids in the business is a real plus. “They get to see mom and dad work hard, be tired, and still get up and smile - still go to church and help coach softball. That’s what makes what we do great. No matter what people say, not everyone is cut out to do this; not everyone has the commitment to do what we do and the great part for us is that the kids get a front-row seat to see if they want to do it as well.”