

# 50 Years of Koepon - 'I would do it all over again.'

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This year it is 50 years ago that the first Koepon dairy farm was started in Garnwerd in the Dutch province of Groningen. The very first farm would later be joined by a significant group of "Koepon farm colleagues" in the countries of the Netherlands, Germany, Great Britain and Canada. Nowadays, Koepon has three dairy farms in three countries with about 1500 milking cows, while a fourth one with 560 cows will be launched shortly. Every reason then for a report about 50 years of Koepon farms, and of course, an interview with the colourful founder of Koepon: Wijnand Pon.

JAN BIERMA HAN HOPMAN

I want to be a farmer! That was an unexpected statement in the Pon family in the year 1960. The family was very involved in marketing, but agriculture... that was not really in the family's blood. But the outdoors was, because Wijnand's father Ben had always taught his children: 'You learn more in nature than you do in school.' As such, father Ben could identify with his youngest son's decision. With the Pon rule as a prerequisite: 'If you do something, do

it right.' And thus the career of the 17-year-old Wijnand changed very rapidly: from a "marketing student" at the German tire company Continental to farm hand for the Hürlimann family on the Swiss Freudhof enterprise. There Wijnand had to feed pigs, clean out pens, and milk cows. 'If he likes that, then this line of work is probably the right thing for him,' father Ben must have thought. And like it, he did! Wijnand enjoyed farm work and when he returned to the

Netherlands a half year later, started working for farmer Bijlsma, where his ability to persevere was boosted again. At this point, Wijnand decided to go the Middelbare Landbouwschool (MLS = agricultural college) and did very well: this was the profession that interested Wijnand after all. At the same time, Wijnand received the opportunity from his father to buy a farm. Remarkable? Wijnand describes it this way: 'Farmer's sons are privileged because they are farmer's sons and



Wijnand Pon: 'When we started, Holsteins were prohibited in the Netherlands. When a national trial started with Holsteins, we participated and in 1972 the first inseminations with Holsteins took place.'

## Elite Breeding

'We have never sold more bulls to AI companies than now,' says Pon, who is also impressed himself. A fact that is immediately confirmed by herd manager Marcel Rijkers from Koepon Garnwerd: 'In the first half of this year alone, we have sold 20 AI sires, which is quite remarkable.' He mentions Lakeside UPS Red Range (Salvatore-Rubicon) as one of the most prominent bull dams. 'From her, we sold bulls, embryos, and female descendants. Even though she will calve for the first time in September, we already have more than 40 offspring from her.' And shares: 'Remarkable: Koepon is well-known for its outstanding black & white cows, but now we are doing a lot with Red Holsteins.' For example, Koepon had the world's highest Red Holstein bull last year: Koepon Altatop-Red (2636 gTPI), a Salvatore son out of Delta daughter Delta Sanne RC. But... the black & whites are also still active. In recent years, the Classy family has especially dominated, but right now the Regenia family is making a comeback, shares Rijkers. And mentions Koepon Ruby Ann as providing a dynamic new Regenia branch. She is a Rubicon-Jabir-Bookem out of an EX-90 Colby daughter with 100,000 kg (220,000 lb) milk – and this Colby still has three sisters >100,000 kg. Ruby Ann herself was sold to Great Britain, and her son AltaZarek (<AltaTopshot) is currently a popular transmitter. So far, a sampling of current elite breeding at Koepon!

are able to take over a farm. That was not the case for me, but I was fortunate that my dad could help me purchase a farm.' And thus, in 1963, the farm De Hunzebocht near Garnwerd was purchased, thanks to the advice of farmer Anno de Jonge, where Wijnand had completed an internship. Here Wijnand adds a significant comment: 'Mentors have always been very important to me. Agriculture was new for me, and it was important to learn from people with experience. So, I have always looked for mentors.' Because you already know the Pon rule: 'When you do something, do it right.'

## A FIRST

Now back to Switzerland for a moment, to Freudhof where Pon took his first steps in agriculture. After his father passed away 1968, Pon rented this farm from 1968 to 1982. In those 14 years, something very special certainly happened in the originally Braunvieh herd. Pon saw the milk potential of the American Brown Swiss animals and decided to introduce them in his Swiss herd (which was managed by the Hürlimann family). He went beyond the strict rules of the Swiss herdbook association (maximum of two generations crossbreeding, up to 75%) and in his own herd bred the first animals with 87.5% Brown Swiss blood. Successfully, so that he became the first Swiss breeder that could sell a bull with 87.5% Brown Swiss blood to the AI company in Zollikofen. This Beiuto, a son of Norvic Lilason Beautician, confirmed his value also when progeny proven and was used again. It was 1982 – the first successfully sampled bull by Pon.

## MILK

Now back to Garnwerd in Groningen, where at De Hunzebocht a tie stall barn for 18 cows was built, while Pon after attending agricultural college, spent 21 months in military service. And after that started working for mentor and cash cropper De Jonge. 'In 1966, I went to live at De Hunzebocht. Then I dared to start working

alongside of my colleagues from Groningen, without having to consult others about everything,' says Pon with a smile. After all, in the meantime, he had gained a lot of experience at Hürlimanns in Switzerland, Bijlsma in Friesland, De Jonge in Groningen and at the MLS. Now a lot changed at De Hunzebocht. Pon decided to build a free stall barn for 180 cows. ('That barn provided lots of benefits – the cows could walk around, which was important for them.') He sold his original herd and purchased new milking cows – in the province of North Holland. 'They had the milkiest cows in the Netherlands and I wanted them, because it is about milk.' Notable: Pon purchased his cows based on DB indexes: early indexes that compared daughters of bulls to the average herd level. Pon: 'When I started, my motto was: 80% of the income is from milk, we will add type by breeding. Of course, I did look at the cows myself, just like I always looked at the daughters of bulls that I was going to use. As a "non-farmer's son" I was entirely neutral and open in breeding; I was not bound to upbringing and traditions, and selected the genetics that I believed were

Koepon Patty 461 EX-94 is one of Pon's big favourites.



optimal for my farm.' An approach that would especially turn out to be of great significance in following years... In the meantime, the first Koepon dairy farm was a reality: established in 1970, now 50 years ago.

## TURNING POINT

A company that had been of service to Pon with the cattle purchase organized an orientation trip for Holsteins to North America in 1971. (Until then, black & whites in the Netherlands were primarily of the Frisian Dutch breed; Holsteins were little known.) Pon was invited for the trip – together with a large group of established breeders from the Netherlands. A trip that led to a lot of discussion and eventually meant a turning point for Dutch breeding. Even if it was



After 50 years, the Koepon flag waves more proudly than ever!

only for Pon to become familiar with the qualities of Holsteins and come into contact with Hank Morsink, who became one of the first Semex employees. As a result – and because of his enthusiasm about the opportunities for Holsteins in the Dutch herd – Pon became the first international distributor for Semex in the fall of 1974. A few years later, that led to the second Koepon farm: Koepon Leusden, with the goal of functioning as a show case for Canadian Holsteins in the Netherlands. It became a dazzling success. Not only was Leusden the highest production herd in the Netherlands for years, the herd was also successful at Dutch shows. This elite herd was discontinued in 1989, because 'by then the Netherlands knew what the Canadians could do', and the show case function was no longer necessary.

## EXPANSION

In 1980, the third Koepon farm had also started: Koepon Baflo, where Pon – also with an eye on the upcoming quota system in Europe – began with Jerseys. And this was a perfect response to the EU quota system; as such, in 1985, the Scottish dairy enterprise Coopon Carse also made a powerful start – the fourth Koepon farm. Yes, Pon really enjoyed farming, while also being a man of continual action and new steps. When the revolution took place in East Germany, he set his eyes on the prominent agricultural region of Mecklenburg-Vorpommern, where in 1991 two dairy farms were purchased: Kuhpon Kaarz and Kuhpon Buchholz. (Of these two farms, Kuhpon Kaarz is still owned and has 600 milking cows.) But, even before this German launch, a move was made in the Canadian province of Ontario: here Pon has purchased Floraholme Holsteins, and started Coopon Flora. First, it was a tie stall barn, but later a free stall barn was built, and later again, Flora would serve as a nucleus herd for Alta, after Pon made a joint venture agreement with Alta Genetics. (At the time, the enterprise was operated under the fitting name, Altapon.)

You realize: halfway through the 1990s, there was a powerful collection of Koepon farms world-wide. Step by step, a number of these farms were transferred to the herd managers, understandably; after Leusden, Coopon Flora and Kuhpon Buchholz were also sold. Today, Koepon has three farms: Garnwerd, Carse and Kaarz, together good for nearly 1500 milking cows. And: shortly, the German Kuhpon Brühl will be launched with 560 cows and eight robots. In addition, they are a 50% partner in a large Polish dairy farm, Paul-Pon-Polska, where 1100 cows reach an average of 12,223 kg 3.80% 3.45%.

## INSPIRING

50 years of Koepon! And a question for Pon: what have these 50 years provided? 'A phenomenal life. I would do it all over again. Also now in the Corona era, I have really enjoyed Koepon. I have travelled a lot, but now I was home and really enjoyed the cows.' As one of the highlights of 50 years of Koepon, Pon mentions 'working together with a number of extraordinary, inspiring farm managers, who show great leadership.' Of course, breeding has always been a vital part of the Koepon strategy. Even before Holsteinization, Pon selected the milkiest black & whites from the Netherlands, and today the best Hol-

## FAVORITES

Of course, we also want to know about the individual cow. And ask the always passionate Pon about his favourite cow. First he mentions, after careful consideration, Hilde 85. The Straight-Pine Elevation Pete daughter who became almost 20 years old and had an impressive lifetime production of 156,000 kg (343,200 lb) milk. 'Our first 10,000 kg fat+protein cow; a zest for life, fertile, and very productive' – with these words, Pon describes his special star. But then immediately adds: 'Of course, there is no cow that could beat our Koepon Patty 461! More than 100,000 kg (220,000 lb) milk, EX-94, Reserve Champion of the Netherlands, and a member of the Dutch team that became the champion at the European Championship.' An interesting note about the homebred Patty: her sire, Chief son (Co) Vista Chief, was imported by Pon to the Netherlands as a young sire, who successfully sampled him together with AI Utrecht. And with him, also bred his Patty... Pon mentions NRM Champion Koepon Hillie 590 yet, but then switches to the present: the Classy, Sanne, and Regenia families that are performing so splendidly in the Garnwerd herd. Yes, because Pon is a man of the present. And especially of the future. He states: 'You should not overestimate the past – as long you have learned its



Through the years, the productive Holsteins at Coopon Carse (UK) have earned various national titles for their farm.

steins world-wide are being used. And at the farm in Garnwerd – where the Koepon collective started – breeding has never been more active – more about that in the accompanying textbox. When we ask Pon about a bull with a lot of significance for Koepon, he does not hesitate for a moment, and says: 'Puget Sound Sheik. With him, we could create the best advertising for the Holstein cow. Thanks to his daughters and their outstanding components, Koepon Leusden reached an average that set a world record for kg fat+protein: 10,108 kg (22,237 lb) 4.72% 3.55% in 1986.'

lessons.' Pon is now focusing on the sustainability of agriculture. 'We need to strive to farm in a much more sustainable way, and need to ensure that the footprint of agriculture gets smaller. We need to see that all as an opportunity – not as a threat. Because the latter will not help us,' judges Pon, who likes to think in terms of opportunities. The 50 Koepon years are masterful proof of that – always with the times, always with terms that resound in the current dairy industry. 50 years of Koepon is then also nothing more than a fascinating interim report – en route to an equally fascinating future. ●