

Chapter 5

During my first trip to New Zealand, I worked on a Dairy. On that farm my boss, a dear friend introduced me to the many characters we were to work with. I remember most of them but one in particular, Naughty Nelly. She was a red and white Friesian and quite a cheeky thing as cows go and would always, somehow, end up out of her paddock, off wandering. She never went far and kept the verges along the country lanes looking tidy. Whenever we came across her though, the boss shouted, 'Go home Nelly,' and off she'd trot. We didn't wait to see if she'd make it but invariably come milking time, she'd be among the herd. Oh and there was Buddha the Jew, ha-ha. She was a little Jersey cow and when the boss said: 'Prey girl, prey,' she'd go down on her front knees and hang her head low. He did this while she was on the rotary parlour but not very often; only when there was someone new to show her off to.

Anyway, soon after returning from that trip I found myself working on an outdoor unit where the farrowing sows were arranged in single paddocks. As a bit of a bonus we were allowed to use a Peter Allen feeder to feed them. Up and down the rows I went dropping off their breakfasts and then I'd go off and check the paddocks and piglets, sows were easy and I'd check them over as I passed. There were if memory serves 14 paddocks in a line and I'd feed five sows then go walking.

Well would you believe it I met another sow, that liked to jump, 'what is it about Peter Allen feeders?' Yep, I'd start feeding her row and I'd see her bounding over all the fence-lines, she was quite the athlete and leapt them with ease. I didn't get far before she made it to the feeder, snout up, hanging off the end of the spout that came down into the paddocks from the side of the feeder, jaws agape.

I couldn't feed while she was there of course, so I jumped the tractor forwards and backwards to try and avoid putting feed straight down her throat, which wouldn't be good,

right. She was quick, but the tractor was quicker, sometimes, other times I'd pummel her head with nuts.

The first time this happened, I tried to drive past all the paddocks to hers in the hope she would follow but she didn't, she irritatingly went the other way to the very first sow I'd fed, scooped her food and then came back to the second paddock in the row. This meant I had two sows under fed that would need a little extra; hand fed of course.

I tried with a bucket in hand to get her back to her own paddock, leaving the tractor and feeder right next to her paddock. A lot of the time sows, if you drop a sow nut every so often will follow you but you have to judge it right; too many and she will be fed and wander off somewhere else; too few or not dropping enough to keep her interest and she wanders off to find more food. You can do this with them behind you or in some cases with them in front of you if you keep the nuts landing just ahead of her.

At the back of the pens, the fences between paddocks had handles, which meant I could open them all up and walk her back. Off I went placing the fence wires on the ground in 90 degree angles, so that I created a sort of passage and in such a way that once she was out of one paddock to the next I could grab the handles on my way past and lock her into the paddock, kind of like closing the door behind her preventing her from coming back.

All good in theory but did it work, did it buggery. I got her through two paddocks, but when she realised there was no food in these, she jumped the fences back down the row to the second paddock, helping herself to more food that wasn't hers. I tried again and managed a third paddock, where the same thing happened. I think I threw the bucket in frustration, not only at her but at myself for being silly enough to believe a sow that had jumped the fences would not do so just because I had a bucket of food for her.

Trying a different approach I had her follow me by rattling my nuts in the bucket and just walking her all the way back to her paddock, not stopping to close fences behind her. That

got her and I gave her a good few nuts to keep her entertained while I fed the rest of the row. Success... Until the next day.

The same thing happened, she came a running and a jumping, when I fed her row. I threw open the tractor door that day and in a fit of fury shouted, 'Naughty Nelly!' followed by, 'Go home Nelly,' it just came to me. She stopped a moment, I shouted again and she did back up and run back home. She got two paddocks, turned and came back towards me at the sound of feed spurting from the feeder. I thought, 'bugger you then,' there was no way I was going through all what I went through the day before. I fed all the sows in that row, right to the end before checking on the piglets. Well bugger me, she only went and followed me all the way back home, jumping the fence every time I fed the next sow.

I couldn't help but shout those same words, 'Naughty Nelly, go home,' every morning when I saw her and eventually she got the idea and ran back home ahead of me to wait for her food. I of course fed the whole row before checking the piglets all the while she was in the farrowing's.

I became quite fond of Nelly. During her stay, when the change around came two rows up, I saw something I'll never forget; a memory I'll cherish forever. I drove up as I usually did, and on approach the first sow in the row danced. She was in the near corner facing out of the paddock, head held low. Moving back, she sort of moon-walked her front trotters, four steps, trotted forwards and repeated. She did this continually, even while I past her, until I dropped food in her paddock. It was a welcoming sight first thing in the morning and although she reminded me of Buddha I didn't call her that, I called her simply, 'Dancer.'