

# TRAINING COURSES HIGHLIGHT OPPORTUNITIES TO IMPROVE PRODUCTIVITY

Improving efficiency is the best way pig farmers in Scotland can achieve better margins during difficult trading conditions, and a recent series of pig management training courses, organised by QMS, gave producers many ways to increase performance.

The courses, which were held in Aberdeen, Nairn and Perth, and were run by pig production expert John Richardson, focused on key performance targets - from the selection of gilts right through to finishing pig management.



Pig production expert, John Richardson.

John conducts training courses on behalf of Yorkshire-based vets Garth Pig Practice, and has a lifetime of experience within the pig industry - from management, nutrition, breeding and grading through to welfare and health.

He said: "Scottish units, on the whole, are performing better than those in England, but my challenge to pig producers in Scotland is to continue to improve their efficiency to a target of 30 pigs weaned per sow per year and a post-weaning performance of 800g per day."

The training courses were split into four key areas of production. Although John was aware that some of the stockpeople who attended were often only interested in the sections of the course which were relevant to their current jobs, he said: "It is important they see the bigger picture, as this is the start of a journey. It is not about what they are doing today but what they might do in the future."

One of the critical management issues in the breeding herd is minimising empty days in order to achieve farrowing rates consistently in excess of 90%, and 2.4 litters per sow per year.

John said: "For the weaner producer one empty day costs £1.85 per sow, and for the average performing herd £39 per sow per year - nearly £20,000 per year in a 500 sow unit."

Some of the factors that can minimise empty days include correct feed intakes in lactation and regular body condition scoring. John said: "Aim for a score of about 3.5 at weaning and feed to achieve a score of 3.75 at farrowing." He also suggested the use of specialist wean-mating diets, twice daily heat detection and optimal insemination timing and technique.

In the session covering management of the farrowing and lactating sow, and pigs through to weaning, John said: "The ultimate measure of success during this important stage of production is rearing 100kg of litter weight at 28 days of age from each farrowing pen or 85kg litter weight from each outdoor farrowing hut."

Minimising pre-weaning mortality to 10% or less through optimised farrowing facilities is crucial, and excellent supervision and stockmanship are required to minimise chilling and maximise vital colostrum intake to at least 200-250ml per piglet in the first 24 hours of life.

John said: "Cross-fostering is also considered to be a vital skill within the first 36 hours - the maxim 'do it properly and do it once' must be applied."



The whole process starts with good gilt selection and, while it may seem obvious, John said it was important that stockmen were able to identify physically correct gilts with 14 or more functional teats, sound legs and a first mating target of 140 to 150kg and, ultimately, an above-average lifetime performance per sow.

However, it is during the post-weaning to finishing stage that the greatest improvements in pig profitability can be made. John believes that the immediate post-weaning period is a critical time to get management right.

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He pointed out that it can be a shock to the piglets' systems to have a change of diet and surroundings at the same time as undergoing the trauma of weaning.

He said: "Growth rates before weaning are typically 250g per day but immediately post-weaning can drop to under 100g per day, while the body fat percentage can halve from 12 to 15% to 6 or 7%."

This stress can be reduced by a number of measures, including creep feeding before weaning and pre-heating the housing to 29°C.

He added: "The efficient conversion of feed into lean, saleable meat is what pig production is all about. Profitability depends on finishing as many pigs as possible within the correct weight range and fat depth according to abattoir specifications.

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## Feedback from one of the delegates



Nora Markus is a stockperson who works at Yonderton Farm near Ellon, Aberdeenshire. She attended one of the training courses and said afterwards:

"I was delighted to have the opportunity to attend this course. John was extremely helpful and able to answer all questions we posed. He created an environment that made the course fun.

"This course gave me a fantastic opportunity to meet people from other farms. I came away with more knowledge and lots of good ideas that could be used productively on the farm to make things better and easier, and therefore to increase productivity."

"Good genetics, quality feed and careful management with constant monitoring are key".