



- Established in 1990
- Located in Leeuwarden (province of Friesland)
- Owner/General Manager: Henk Bles
- 50 employees active in:
 - Bles Dairies Consultancy
 - Bles Dairies East Africa (Eldoret, Kenya)
 - Bles Dairies Farm (200 milking cows & young stock/Broek, Netherlands)
 - Bles Dairies Genetics (Semex distributor)
 - Bles Dairies Livestock (marketing and export)

Bles Dairies: Travel Through the Unique World of Entrepreneur Henk Bles

Entrepreneur Henk Bles, the founder of Bles Dairies: 'Food safety and food security are the two core words around which everything in the world of food production circles!'

A keen eye for development in the dairy industry: That is one of the most prominent core qualities of the Dutch company Bles Dairies. With lots of passion and driven by a rich family tradition, founder Henk Bles, together with his employees, contributes internationally in a variety of ways to the dairy industry. 'Wherever in the world cows are being milked, I feel at home.'

JORDEN STEGINK HAN HOPMAN

We meet Henk Bles at Bles Dairies Farm in Broek, a village in the water-abundant south western part of the province of Friesland. Once renovations are complete, 200 cows can be milked here in a climate-neutral manner. Bles, who started with nothing in 1990 as a cattle exporter, is rightly proud of the purchase and expansion of the 125 ha dairy farm: Proud and amazed. 'Everything that has been achieved under the name of Bles Dairies originates from a passion that is difficult to describe. What it comes down to, in essence, is that I want to contribute to the development of dairy farms, no matter where in the world. "Dairy development"; that is my

deepest motivation.' The use of English words by Bles comes as easily as deploying activities in the dairy industry. 'My father, originating from a family of farmers and salesmen, was the general manager of the local processing plant. As such, we often hosted international guests at home. In addition, we often travelled abroad as a family. Jan Bles, my twin brother, pursued a career in the international dairy processing industry. My passion extends to the door of the processing plant and lies close to the cow.'

VISION

Henk Bles started, besides cattle export, new initiatives geared to breeding and consultancy.

'Bles Dairies is a compilation of activities that each offers the potential of contributing to dairy farms. The idea for consultancy comes directly from the needs of our customers. I saw that the management levels on the farms of our customers were sometimes insufficient to fully benefit from the genetic value of the purchased heifers. Our enterprise Bles Dairies Genetics, including the Semex distribution rights for Belgium, Denmark, the Netherlands, and Russia, was established in order to contribute to the improvement of the dairy herds of our customers. Increasing profitability on dairy farms requires a comprehensive approach. Our key account management strategy is aligned with

this. Bles Dairies provides high quality dairy cattle and genetics, and supports these products with advice and training.'

When asked about the future role of the Holstein cow, Bles states: 'For nearly all highly developed and intensive dairy regions, the purebred Holstein cow is by far the most suitable. Stronger yet, in these areas, working with Holsteins is an absolute "must". Dairy farming requires the best; without a doubt, the high-producing Holstein is a part of it.' In his plea for the high-producing Holstein breed, Bles makes a qualification: 'Holsteins need to be functional in terms of frame, udder and feet & legs, and must produce in a healthy way. Society as a whole demands milk from healthy cows. The dairy industry is increasingly responding to this. It is looking for more transparency in the production chain and wants dairy farmers to be open to sharing about the health of their dairy cows. This requires knowhow and advice throughout the value chain; a development that offers new opportunities to Bles Dairies.' Developing vision and food production are at the core of Bles' entrepreneurship. 'How can we create a green revolution? Is gene technology a threat or does it offer opportunities? Such

such, we like to introduce our customers to the newest technology in the area of artificial intelligence.' Bles further explains: 'With consultancy work, we regularly experience that the data with which we work, due to data entry errors, is not sufficiently usable. IDA has the critical advantage that it is not dependent on data being entered by people. IDA communicates to the farmer without the intervention of people, about factors such as health, fertility, and the well-being of the milking cows. IDA is a self-learning system and learns from the behavior of cows and the farmer. As such, IDA is a real assistant to the farmer.'

According to Bles, up-and-coming technology developments will bring about even greater changes. 'Artificial intelligence will fundamentally change dairy farming. Until a short time ago, the most important question for potential dairy farmers was: "Do I enjoy working with cows?" Now young dairy farmers need to ask: "Am I open to working with cutting edge technology?" We are standing on the brink of an entirely different world.'

KNOWLEDGE

IDA is being used at Bles Dairies. At the same time, on Bles' dairy farm, all newborn heifer calves are tested for genomics for selection and breeding purposes. Bles uses both technologies in order to improve the efficiency of his own dairy herd. 'In the dairy industry, it's all about cost control. This is as true for our dairy farm as it is for all the dairy farms with which we do consultancy work. Technological developments play a crucial role, not only on a large farm in Russia with 10,000 cows, but also in Africa, for example. Recently, I was doing consulting work on a small farm in Uganda and to my surprise came across a group of beautiful Holstein heifers. The owner, a surgeon by profession, told me that in his country, they imported embryos from North America at one point. For the descendants of this import, with the assistance of Google, he had looked for semen from the best DNA sires. This example demonstrates that the transfer of knowledge about future developments in the dairy industry is also very important. For years already, Bles Dairies has organized practical training sessions for farmers and recently entered into a cooperative agreement with Wageningen University. Within the international knowledge sector, besides the use of textbooks and practical courses, the role of e-learning is currently really taking off. The Netherlands, the home base of Bles Dairies, has good infrastructure and thus a lot of knowledge about guaranteeing production chains, knowledge for which there is a lot of demand in

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TECHNOLOGY

When it comes to being able to offer extra information about the health of dairy cows, Bles foresees an important contribution in the development of technology. This is an important reason why Bles Dairies became an investor in the artificial intelligence platform IDA. IDA monitors the behaviour of cows and, via artificial intelligence, processes the data into valuable insights for the farmer. Bles: 'At Bles Dairies, we believe that the application of new technologies contributes to sustainable animal husbandry. IDA relieves farmers, and improves the well-being, health and fertility of cows. As



Source: **Holstein International**

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countries that also want to develop high quality production chains. Bles Dairies, along with Wageningen University and others, is developing that digital knowledge transfer.'

EYE FOR COWS

From cattle exporter to the manager of digital knowledge transfer; this characterizes the entrepreneurial developments which Henk Bles discussed earlier, to his own amazement. 'That I, as an investor in IDA, would end up working with highly gifted technicians, or with Wageningen University, to develop knowledge transfer, never crossed my mind in 1990 when I started as a cattle exporter.' Technology and knowledge are now Bles' most prominent work areas: Always with the right compass when it comes to up-and-coming developments in the dairy industry. 'The world is changing more and more quickly; dairy cattle breeding is a nice example of this. In the late 1990s, I was inspired by top breeding and purchased the young Camphors Rudolph Laurana from the Laurie Sheik family in Canada. Later, in the Netherlands, she scored EX-93 and became Reserve Champion at the NRM. An influential bull was bred thanks to QG Elaine, another Rudolph that I had purchased together with Mts Reitsma-Kloosterman. She became the dam of Mascol. Two decades later, Holstein breeding has changed entirely. Due to the capital intensive nature of current DNA breeding, it has become several times more difficult for an individual breeder to breed an influential sire. Holstein breeding is symbolic of the rapid changes in the international dairy industry. Part of my entrepreneurship is to discover all these developments at an early stage, and then also to think from the perspective of the cow. An eye for cows splendidly symbolizes Bles Dairies' entrepreneurial vision for the dairy industry.' ●