



## Make regular deposits in your wellbeing account

Building a sustainable future in farming means taking action to look after yourself as well as the business, says Richard Ash, manager of a large dairy farm near Marton.

Richard began at the farm 12 years ago, and is now manager of Tutu Totara Dairy Ltd, a sharemilking company which he now has an equity share in. In 2015, he was named Manawatu Sharemilker of the Year.

Over the years the scale of the operation has greatly increased, along with the responsibilities and pressures. Managing staff well and making sure they too are achieving some work-life balance is all part of the job.

“My first year here we had 550 cows, and there was just me and two other staff. Since then we’ve progressively grown, and now we’re milking 1,400 cows and I manage a team of ten. So the scale has definitely changed. The management of staff has become a huge part of the job, which has been a real change.”

Dairy farming is in Richard’s blood and he’s never wanted to do anything else. He grew up in Hawera where his grandparents, and uncles and aunts were dairy farmers. He always had a gut feeling that he wanted to go dairy farming so he did a

Bachelor of Agricultural Science at Massey and has been farming ever since.

### Hang on to the lifestyle benefits

Richard has always found the farming lifestyle appealing but bigger farming operations can put that at risk, he says.

“I love working with animals and have always loved the outdoors. But to get the lifestyle benefits on bigger farms, you have to be smart about how you manage people and time. I hate to say it, it can become a bit of a factory-like environment if you are not careful, so you have to make sure the lifestyle benefits don’t get lost.”

There are a number of wellbeing fundamentals to try and stick to, says Richard. Foremost among them are taking regular breaks and working on your fitness.

### Take time off

“As a bare minimum, it’s about taking one or two days off a week, and making sure you stick to that as much as possible. I was quite guilty of rostering a day off and then something would come up and it’d be easier to just go in. And I still do that, to be honest. But you should try to religiously stick to your days off.”





This is a principle he applies to staff as well. Staff get four days off a fortnight and are paid by the hour so that if there is a long day, they know they are getting paid for it, which has really helped to improve morale. Richard has also made sure that he has extra people available whom he can call on if staff are sick or have to attend a funeral. Anticipating stress points and making sure staff needs are being met, is an essential part of building a resilient business, says Richard.

## Getting a sweat up

Taking time to exercise is integral to a work-life balance, says Richard. Some kind of aerobic workout makes you feel a lot better, and the benefits last.

**“I’ve found that getting out and getting a sweat up really helps. Sometimes it’s the last thing I feel like doing ... but once you get out there, you feel a hell of a lot better and the next day you feel a lot better too.”**

“Farming has become a lot more mechanised. You’re on your feet for a long time, but you’re probably not getting the aerobic workout you need. Milking on the rotary is quite a physical job, but if you never get your heart rate up, it probably hasn’t done enough.

“I’ve found that getting out and getting a sweat up really helps. Sometimes it’s the last thing I feel like doing when I get home after a long day. Everyone’s like that with exercise. But once you get out there, you feel a hell of a lot better and the next day you feel a lot better too.

“I mainly run. I play squash and a bit of tennis as well, but I try to go for three or four runs a week. I don’t go a hell of a long way, usually 4 or 5kms. I don’t milk every morning anymore, so lately I’ve been trying to run in the morning. I like running at night but if you get home late, you often can’t be bothered going for a run whereas if you’ve done it in the morning, it’s done.

“Certainly there are fits and starts. I’ll have a month of going three times a week and then a couple of weeks without going at all. I feel quite guilty if I don’t go. It’s a funny thing – you think, ‘Oh, I haven’t got enough energy, I’m too tired to go.’ But it’s almost counter-intuitive. When you’re fit you have more energy, you feel better, whereas if you don’t do anything it’s easier to do less and less. You feel like you’ve got less energy, even though you’re doing less.”

## Catching up with friends

Richard has built up strong connections with the local community through sport, and is convinced catching up with friends is vital.

"We're halfway between Marton and Hunterville. Hunterville is a real old-school rural community. The tennis and the squash is up there, I played rugby and coach up there too. I think there's only two or three hundred people who live in town but there's a squash club, tennis, a rugby club and a couple of pubs. I'm really lucky to have that community. It's taken a while to fit in, because I'm from Taranaki originally, but it's a great, great community."

## Team sport the way to go

Richard is a big fan of group sports which he says kill two birds with one stone – improving your fitness and catching up with friends. And it applies some helpful pressure not to let your mates down.

"With group sport you feel more obliged to be there. If I'm running by myself and I decide not to go, I'm only letting myself down, whereas in a team you feel obliged to turn up.

"The best thing about rugby or any group sport is the social aspect. Especially at the moment, everything is about the pay-out, everything is doom and gloom, but you go off to the rugby and there's only two dairy farmers in the team. It's three quarters sheep and beef boys, and they're not talking about the pay-out. So two or three hours go by and you haven't even thought about the bloody pay-out. And you come home and you do mentally feel better. There's another whole world out there. It's very easy to get stuck in your own circle."

Richard is engaged to Anna and they plan to marry next summer. He credits her with

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improving his eating habits, keeping him off the pies and baked beans.

"I'm lucky, Anna cooks most of the time which helps a lot. She's got a big vege garden and three-quarters of what we eat seems to come out of the garden."

## A healthy wellbeing balance

Recently Richard attended a *Farmstrong Healthy Thinking* workshop which he said was gold. He thinks *Farmstrong* is a great initiative because "they've let farmers decide how it works, which is the perfect way to it."

A "wellbeing bank balance" analogy used at the workshop has really struck a chord with him.

"You need a healthy balance in the wellbeing bank account to be able to draw on. You make deposits through taking breaks, seeing mates, going for runs, doing the stuff you love. But when the account is run down, you really are lost. You need something to draw on." ■