

Luther Elliss, Dairy Advocate for Michigan's School Children

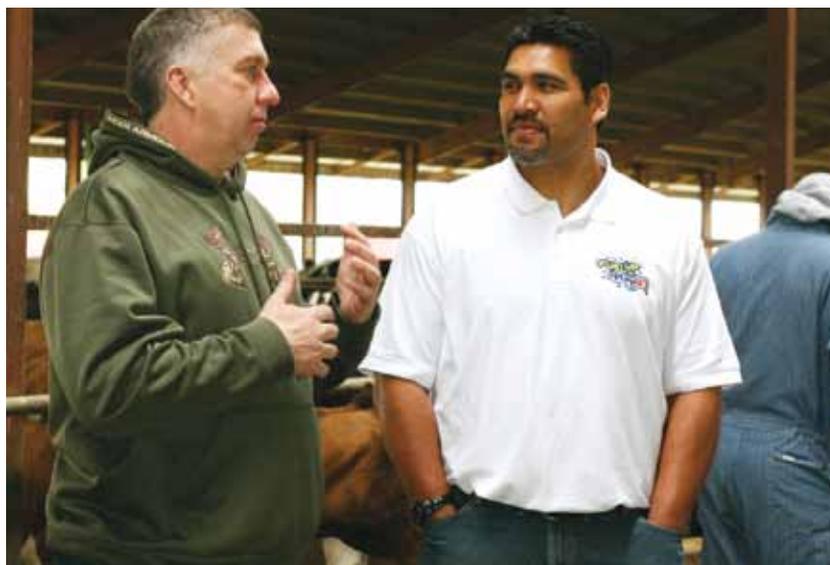
By Mitch Smith
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With student wellness an important concern in Michigan's schools--along with a growing body of evidence that links poor nutrition, physical activity and obesity as factors that directly relate to lower levels of school achievement--the United Dairy Industry of Michigan has been working intensively to activate the Fuel Up to Play 60 (FUTP 60) program throughout the state.

Helping affect positive change in the healthy eating and physical activity environment in schools is a step in the right direction toward having more focused, engaged, and higher-achieving students.

FUTP 60 supports national health, nutrition and physical education/physical activity guidelines and standards, and helps schools meet their wellness goals, supporting a Coordinated School Health approach. The program also delivers the star power of the NFL through professional football player appearances at select school events throughout the state.

Developing a great spokesman from the ranks of the NFL is not always an easy thing to do. After all, to have key messages to deliver to an audience is one thing but to have a true understanding of dairy farming and why dairy farmers' promote a school wellness program can be a difficult bridge to span. It takes the right person, the proper attitude and the passion to seek the knowledge that will take him from a spokesperson to a true advocate.



Former Detroit Lion Luther Elliss (right) and MMPA member Steve Brock

Enter Luther Elliss, retired Detroit Lions player who carries with him a passion for children and their health and wellbeing.

Elliss had a bit of exposure to farming in his youth, but it was shoveling cow manure out of barns at a relative's farm. Then sports took over his life. Four years at the University of Utah and 11 seasons as an NFL starter were his consuming passions. After injury forced him to retire from the NFL, Elliss continued to be involved with causes to support children. Part of this interest in children comes from the fact that he and his wife, Rebecca, are the proud parents of 12 children, both biological and adopted. He is a natural spokesperson for the FUTP 60 program in Michigan schools and quickly became involved in promoting FUTP 60 throughout the state at special events during the school year.

Elliss' understanding about why dairy farmers put so much effort behind a program like FUTP60 grew unexpectedly while traveling to FUTP 60 events in May 2011. Along with the school stops, Elliss was given the opportunity

to visit two Michigan family dairy farms. Elliss toured each facility and learned what happens on dairy farms to produce the safe, wholesome and nutritious products that he was promoting to school children. Elliss also found he was carrying around a few misconceptions about dairy farm practices as well.

At the McCune Dairy Farm in St. Louis, Chase McCune, who works along side his dad Chuck every day at their farm, explained what goes on in his milking parlor and throughout the farm.

Steve Brock, dairy farmer from Daggett, introduced Elliss at an assembly held for the Stephenson middle/high school students to introduce them to the FUTP60 program.

"I am proud to introduce Mr. Luther Elliss to the students of Stephenson and I am proud of the FUTP60 program which I and my fellow dairymen are providing to schools," said Brock.

"After that introduction at the Stephenson school by Steve," Elliss said, "my whole way of thinking about the program shifted. I began

to see how passionate and caring the dairy farmers were. Steve took two days away from his farm to personally be at these events. From the way dairy farmers like Steve care for their cows to the passion for their programs to promote dairy products in the schools. I see that they are really great people who love and take great pride in what they do and the products they produce.”

The next stop was Steve Brock’s dairy farm, where Elliss not only got to know Steve and his wife Becky and their three children, he tried his hand at milking cows in the Brock’s parlor alongside the other milkers.

After a final FUTP60 school event at Stambaugh Elementary School in Iron River, Elliss visited the Jilbert Dairy in Marquette where he met with fans in the ice cream parlor. He followed up the fan meet and greet with a tour of the dairy processing plant, where he witnessed milk being processed and bottled and turned into the dairy products that he enjoys and promotes.

“Seeing what happens to the milk after it leaves the farm, all the safety steps and care that goes into making sure it stays cold and fresh, and ends up in a bottle, often the same day, is so impressive,” said Elliss after the tour of Jilbert Dairy.

“Everybody I met during this trip--the farmers, the school FUTP60 supporters and the dairy plant workers--all are very proud of the products that they work so hard to produce and promote. They wear their hearts on their sleeves and I respect that,” said Elliss.

Elliss now views the FUTP60 program with a new

perspective. Now, at the beginning of each presentation, Elliss tells the students that they really need to “Thank your local Michigan dairy farmers for delivering this program to your school because they are the ones that fund, organize and deliver FUTP60 to make a difference in your health.”

Later, Elliss added that, “It might be a partnership with the NFL, but it is the dairy farmers that are funding and driving home this program.”

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