

When Farmstrong Scotland was established, it was under the guidance of the hugely successful team in New Zealand, where the initiative had originated some years earlier.

Seeing the impact of the programme on the farming industry was what initially sparked the founders of Farmstrong Scotland to push ahead with the concept.

The aim was, and still is, to give farmers and crofters the tools and inspiration to prioritise their wellbeing through a greater understanding of how to improve it, and the importance of doing so, not least on their businesses.

Sam Whitelock joined Farmstrong Scotland for the first in its winter webinar series to discuss his rugby career, his family's farm and the challenges they've faced.

As one of New Zealand's first ambassadors for their programme, he also touched on the personal

Sam grew up on his family's dairy farm with his parents and three brothers.

With only five years between the four brothers, they were thick as thieves and had an upbringing which Sam describes as "awesome" and one he wouldn't change for the world.

"The business has always been a family affair. Pocket money didn't exist; if any of us boys wanted something, we had to work for it.

I can clearly remember getting up at 4am on Christmas morning and the family heading out to milk the cows so that the staff could have some time off."

Like many other children from New Zealand's rural communities, Sam and his brothers went off to boarding school.

It was here that the boys' passion for sport came alive and in particular they discovered a love for rugby.

experienced growing up, that kept him grounded and ultimately led to him being so successful at such a young

At aged just 21, Sam was selected to play for the All Blacks, with all four brothers playing for the team over the

While busy with his rugby career, Salmonella hit the farm hard, with the business left with no option but to euthanise hundreds of their cows and young stock to stop the spread of infection.

Sam spoke of the intense effect this had on his parents, his mum couldn't leave the house for three days, and the emotional and financial pressure was huge – he'd never seen either of them under so much stress.

It was a difficult time, but they came through it.

They had a strong support





After later reading and hearing about the Farmstrong programme, Sam wanted to use the family's experience to demonstrate that, despite hard times, there is always light at the end of the tunnel.

Sam said: "The most rewarding thing now is when someone comes up to me in the street and shakes my hand and says thank you – they might have just encountered a similar Salmonella-type situation, and advice from Farmstrong, and real-life stories from other farmers was what helped them get through.

"What I love about the programme is that it's farmer-led, and we can all learn from other people's troubles or other people's successes and make it easier on ourselves."

Starting with 60 cows, the Whitelock family now milk 2,700 between them. Sam is returning to farming after retiring from rugby in May 2024, leaving after a very impressive 153 tests and with the title of most-capped All Blacks player in history.

Over the years,

he has learnt that there are similarities between sport and farming.

"It used to be full-on rugby, and now it's full-on farming, but I can apply the same principles to prioritise my wellbeing.

There will always be a thousand things to be done, and there's a list that never goes away, but getting off the farm gives you time to stop."

"Just like in rugby, farmers are guilty of finishing a project and pushing on to the next thing and not taking a step back to notice or appreciate what you've just accomplished.

Whether it's a new shed or the end of a season, we all need to take more notice of the challenges we've overcome."

Through Farmstrong, Sam says the biggest things he's learnt are how to understand himself better and what wellbeing actually is.

"My wife picks up on it too, but knowing when I'm stressed and haven't been taking enough breaks away from work – and they don't always have to be off the farm, but sometimes just stopping for a cup of tea to collect my thoughts, get my energy back and breathe.

Sam advocates the small things in helping the most.

"Your brain is the first thing to get dehydrated, so don't let something like that affect business decisions; take a water bottle with you wherever you go.

"Try and have a good routine, get a good amount of sleep, get away from screens before bed and make a list of things you've learnt that day, whether from a neighbour or mentor, so you can reflect on the knowledge you've picked

To watch Sam's webinar recording head to the Wellbeing Hub on the Farmstrong website.





Sam's trio & tested:

- •Read a few different books, get information from different sources and talk to people older than you - we're so lucky we can access information in so many different ways nowadays.
- Be open to new ideas and suggestions, keep an open mind and look at changes as an opportunity to grow.
- Take time to STOP and enjoy or celebrate what you've achieved, whether it's a small thing or a big one.



