



# INTERVIEW

## CHASE KNUTSON,

Owner/Operations Manager, K&K Farms Inc.

By Joe Kertzman, managing editor, Badger Common'Tater

**NAME:** Chase Knutson

**TITLE:** Owner/operations manager

**COMPANY:** K&K Farms Inc.

**LOCATION:** Almond, WI

**HOMETOWN:** Almond

**YEARS IN PRESENT POSITION:** Seven

**PREVIOUS EMPLOYMENT:** n/a

**SCHOOLING:** Tri-County High School and University of Wisconsin (UW)-River Falls

**ACTIVITIES/ORGANIZATIONS:** Alpha Gamma Rho Fraternity, UW-River Falls Football, and a member of the Wisconsin Potato & Vegetable Growers Association

**FAMILY:** Wife, Hattie, and kids, Beau (1.5 years) and Amara (6 months)

**HOBBIES:** Snowmobiling, skiing, fishing, hunting, and being a husband and dad

*There's a sense of pride,* and a bit of hijinks, when Chase Knutson and his younger brother, Dawson, relay the story about accidentally “ripping up” a field when they were young.

“I was around 10 years old and Chase was 14,” Dawson relates. “Chase was cultivating a field and I was riding along. He got tired and decided to take a nap on the box behind the seat. He told me to drive and cultivate the rest of the field. When he woke up from his nap, I had ripped up the field badly.”

At the time, Chase and Dawson’s father, Jerry Knutson, owned and operated Oasis Irrigation in Plainfield, Wisconsin, and K&K Farms Inc., in Almond, where he raised grains, potatoes, and vegetables for canning. Jerry sadly passed away in December 2019 after a tragic snowmobile accident in Michigan.

Suddenly, Chase, Dawson and their mother, Kathy Jo, found themselves running the irrigation business (Kathy Jo) and the farm (Chase and Dawson.)

Before he passed, Jerry had taught the boys valuable lessons about not only raising crops, driving tractors, caring for the land, and hooking up and maintaining implements, but also about respecting neighbors

**Above:** Chase Knutson (left) operates K&K Farms Inc., a third-generation vegetable, potato and grain farm in Almond, Wisconsin, with his brother, Dawson (right). The brothers are standing in front of their John Deere 1720 planter hooked onto an 8235 tractor.



and being forthright and honest.

“He introduced us to neighboring farmers,” Chase relates, “and taught us how to be respectful. Dad was loyal to his family, his career and his community. He gave it to you straight. We didn’t know it at the time, but those same neighbors would be there for us after Dad died.”

“They would just stop out and help when we needed it. They’d tell us to ask if there was ever anything we needed, they were an open book when we had questions, and we asked a lot of questions. Just like Dad, they always gave it to us straight,” Chase says.

Dawson says the apple didn’t fall far from the tree. “You’re looking at the most honest, straightforward, and genuinely caring guy in the county,” he says about his brother, Chase, “and he conducts business with integrity.”

**Chase, I see that K&K Farms Inc. was established by your grandfather, Ralph, in 1958. Can you give me a brief history of the operation in your own words?** Ralph and Jeanne (Grandpa and Grandma Knutson) started the farm in 1958. They moved up from Illinois when a family friend of theirs had moved here, found a farm in the area, and told Grandpa Ralph about it.

It’s crazy to think that Grandpa bought the first 240 acres, a house, buildings, and equipment, for less than a new pickup costs today. My grandparents then started other businesses, including Traveling Guns, Lilliston Cultivators, Deutz engines, and selling center pivots.

While running the equipment companies, they were also involved with hand-picked strawberries and cucumbers, raising hogs, growing veggies (peas, snap beans, and sweet corn), and later even getting into potatoes.

**Left:** The Claas combine is put to work during soybean harvest on K&K Farms Inc. in Almond, Wisconsin.


**Right:** Chase Knutson (right) builds irrigation with the crew at K&K Farms.

Grandpa was also president of the Wisconsin vegetable grower association at one time before it became a committee of the WPVGA.

When my dad eventually took over the farming operation, he continued the irrigation

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business (Oasis Irrigation) and the farm, raising potatoes, vegetables, and grains.

**Are you farming with both of your brothers, Dawson and Preston, and what does the “K&K” stand for?** My younger brother, Dawson, is currently on the farm working alongside me. He has learned a lot in the last three years of working here.

My brothers and I asked dad that question many times—what the K&K stands for—but he never had an answer for it. (Editor’s note: perhaps Jerry subconsciously knew that someday two Knutson’s would be running the operation.)

**Are other family members working for K&K Farms Inc., and if so, in what capacity?** We are a farm that would not operate without family and friends helping us out year-round. My wife is constantly picking Dawson and I up from the fields and carting us around.

My uncle, Dan Kemnetz, has been here for us helping with all the irrigation service and tractor driving in the fall, and Grandpa Wilson has driven a semi for us throughout the years.



Chase Knutson digs potatoes with his son, Beau.



Chase (driver's seat) and Dawson Knutson pose on their dad Jerry's old potato truck.

With many other friends and brothers-in-law who drop everything to come out and help us when needed, I'm truly blessed to have a core community around me to help make the operation go.

**I believe you grow corn and beans, but can you give me a rundown of all the vegetables?** Over the past few years, we have been concentrating primarily on grain. We have grown sweet corn and kidney beans but are

currently raising peas and snap beans to help with the potato rotation.

Our potato acreage, however, is land we rent to other growers. We are always looking for ways to diversify and change with the agriculture world as fast as we can.

**Do you hope to expand more into potatoes?** The potato industry is something I've always wanted to be a part of someday. With it being such a competitive market, it hasn't been easy to find that avenue. We have worked with other farmers for as long as I have been on the farm, and that has put potatoes in our rotation, but it would be a dream to have some potatoes of my own.

**How have you been able to keep the operation going since your dad's passing?** My dad always commented, "You need to know this [farm operation] because one day I will be gone."

He pushed me while at the same time allowing me to make mistakes and learn from them, which I think ultimately helped me make the farm successful. I'm thankful my dad taught me enough before he passed, and along the way, he sure made it easy for my brother and I to just



Chase Knutson drives his grandpa Ralph's 520 John Deere tractor.

follow an example of how he did it.

One gift my dad left me was a farming community that has always been above and beyond helpful to me and my family.

Many of these guys in the area are role models to me. I never had famous actors or pro athletes I looked up to, but instead, I looked up to some of the best farmers in the world here in the Central Sands.

**How old were you when you first started working on the farm, and do you have any memories you'd like to share from back then?** I don't know how old I was, but I know I was young just like any kid who's raised on a farm. I have many memories of farming and being in the ag business world from my exposure through Oasis Irrigation. We had one truck on the farm, and our kids' job was to pick rocks.

Memories include learning to work on equipment, sitting by Dad while he talked farming with many farmers and vendors, or even just working alongside Dad.

The one memory that sticks with me is an "argument" that started and continued for years in our farming journey, of why we didn't own a large tractor to do our tillage.

With Dad running the irrigation business, we weren't farming many of our own acres. Then, Dad's grand idea was to put me in a neighbor's tractor with a 30-foot implement and no GPS. We all know how those tillage lines looked, but looking back, I realize Dad wanted to see if I would not just like it but love it.

**What does working a generational farm and keeping it in the family mean to you?** Working on the family farm is bittersweet. I'm part of the third generation of farmers in my family, and as the saying goes, the third generation loses the farm. So, there's no pressure to put this puzzle together for the next generation!

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*"I never had famous actors or pro athletes I looked up to, but instead, I looked up to some of the best farmers in the world here in the Central Sands."*

**– Chase Knutson**

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My dad wasn't around to finish his plans or this puzzle, but I'm beyond grateful that Mom has allowed me to go after my life dreams and goals with our family farm. I will do anything to transition it to the next generation intact and productive.

**Has technology, and which technologies, changed the way you operate?** We aren't a big farm. We work 1,200 acres with just two guys.

So, we don't have much downtime or time to do things twice.

Telemetry on our pivots has improved our operation, so it is important that all the machines are constantly connected. One pivot will run 700-900 hours a year on our farm. With multiple machines, we're pushed for time to get everything done and done right. Telemetry alone saves us a guy or two just on the irrigation end.

**Left:** Of all their old family tractors, Chase and Dawson Knutson say the original tractor on the farm—a 1940's Ferguson—was the easiest to gas, tune and fire up after years of being idle.

**Right:** Chase Knutson says he was gardening with his dad, Jerry (left), when this photo was taken.

Equipment size and having the right tools on the planter and harvest equipment have been important



**Above:** The trucks are ready to roll when planting begins at K&K Farms Inc.



to us. The correct size of equipment means we don't need too many employees, and having GPS allows us to monitor all the other machinery that we're running.

I try to tell my brother that we have GPS not to have sub-inch straight-line driving, but to achieve sub-millimeter

seed placement and make sure we are harvesting high-quality crops.

We try new technology all the time on the farm, but that's not an easy thing to do with the changing tech world and how quickly innovations become outdated. It's important that technology we invest in gives us

**Above:** The grain bin site is pictured both day (opposite page) and night at K&K Farms as well as with Chase (left) and Dawson Knutson standing in front of their new bin.

a return on our investment.

Sometimes elbow grease is the best technology you can have on the farm.

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**Left:** Chase Knutson rides the tractor with his dad, Jerry.

**Above:** Chase and Dawson Knutson's uncles Jim and Jon are shown in this historic photo with the family's hand-picked strawberries.

**Who are your customers for the vegetables you grow?** We mainly just work with canning companies here in the Central Sands. Being a third-generation grower, these are all the people that we worked with closely for many years.

It's fun working with and knowing most of the people in the canning world, some of whom I went to high school or UW-River Falls with, and enjoying the connections made by my dad.

**You mentioned working with neighboring farms. How?** I do work with neighbors in this area quite often. I have done many custom acres for neighbors in times of need to make sure we all hit the right windows to be successful.

It's a privilege to receive a call to go do work for farmers in the Sands. This past fall, we had a combine catch fire, and it didn't take long for my phone to start blowing up with guys unhooking to come help us finish harvest for the year. I greatly appreciate that.

**How is the vegetable market, and what changes would you like to see?** The vegetable market hasn't changed much for me as a canning crop

**Left:** Chase Knutson (right) works on a pivot center drive with his brother, Preston (left), and with his dad, Jerry, not too far away when this photo was taken years ago.

producer. Some of the companies are slowly working to produce more frozen produce to get the customer a fresher vegetable to eat.

I wish we could find a way to get a better, fresher crop to the customer that has a good shelf life before being consumed and that isn't too costly for the producers. We produce high-end crops here; we just need to figure out what the consumers need faster.

**When does your growing season start and end, and how much of what you do depends on the weather?** Our growing season starts the last week of April with pea planting and goes until the second week of November with corn harvest.

I'd say everything we do has to do with weather. Planting is the most important thing we do and if it's too cold or wet, we don't go into the fields.

Having to watch the weather for fertilizer passes we make is also very important. Just as important is the timing of chemical inputs to ensure applications fit into certain weather windows, so that's another weather-dependent factor.



Finally, for harvest, we rely on certain heat units to finish the crop up. We are not the biggest farm, so we try to micro-manage everything we do so we can have the best outcome we need, and weather is one tool we work around to be excellent.

**What is your biggest challenge each year?** Being excellent. I only get to plant and farm the land 30-40 more times in my life, hopefully for years past that. I am seven years into this and want to do it perfectly or better than last year every time.

Some of our crops only grow for 60 days. In that window, there are only 15-20 days when we are applying chemicals and fertilizer. So, hoping for good weather and paying attention to the crop is critical or we'd spend the other 340-some days of the year wondering how to avoid the mistakes we made.

**What accomplishments are you proud of?** Being a husband and dad and raising a family in agriculture. Don't get me wrong, growing 300 bushels/acre of corn is a cool achievement, but having a wife that is a diehard of agriculture and works harder than me, while also having two kids that will not let Dad go outside without them or let me miss



Parting shot: A Zimmatic pivot sold back in the day by Oasis Irrigation and currently by Badger State Irrigation is pictured during sunrise on K&K Farms.

a tractor or pivot running out in a field, that's priceless.

Raising my family in the agriculture community here is an accomplishment to me, and I cannot wait for my kids to build their own relationships and stories here.

**What do you hope for the future of K&K Farms Inc.?** Continued business is the goal. The farm has been growing since 1958. It is the goal to take it further than what Grandpa or Dad could have ever dreamt of.

I hope my kids and nieces and nephews all get the same chances as I did of farming their great-grandfather's farm.

**Is there anything I've missed that you'd like to add, Chase?** I just want to thank my wife for allowing me time to pursue this crazy passion of mine. Thank you to my mom who believed in me after Dad passed to take the reins of the farm and run it. Finally, to the community here, thank you for always looking after me and allowing me to look up to and learn from you guys. **BCT**

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