

Merlo combo ticks the boxes for mixed Co Antrim farm

Gary Abbott travelled to Cullybackey, Co Antrim, to meet dairy and poultry farmer Maurice Knowles and find out why he opts to run two Merlo telehandlers, a P27.6 and a TF42.7



Although both very different in size and stature, both machines share a lot of design similarities.

Situated near the village of Cullybackey, just a stone's throw from Ballymena, Co Antrim, Maurice Knowles farms alongside his son, Daniel. For generations, dairy has been the main farm enterprise. The duo currently milk 120 cows in a full indoor system, calving the majority of cows in the spring and autumn months.

Having made the decision to become involved in the family business full-time, Daniel decided to venture into the poultry sector. In 2020, two free-range layer units were built. Between the two enterprises, there is always a considerable reliance on a telehandler.

Just over 10 years ago, the family transitioned to the Merlo brand. They are now on their third and fourth machines: a TF42.7 model, which was purchased in 2021, and a compact P27.6 model, which arrived in March 2023.

Loader background

Maurice has been running side-boom telehandlers on the farm for over 25 years. Before the luxury of a dedicated telehandler, tractors and front loaders were used for all farm loading duties.

"Our first telehandler was a Manitou and we ran Manitous continuously up until 10 years ago. We ran fresh second-hand machines. They were good loaders but we always found ourselves fixing niggly issues, such as burst hydraulic pipes, at the worst times. We had a few issues with transmissions too," he says.

"Our neighbour also ran Manitou machines at the time and it was the norm

that we'd borrowed each other's when there was a breakdown.

"I had been talking to a salesman at DA Forgies who had sold us machines previously. I was after a very fresh loader, thinking I'd have fewer issues as ours was moving on in age.

"The lads at Forgies were keen I tried a Merlo to get my opinion as they had just took on the brand. I didn't know anything about Merlo at the time and said I wasn't interested. However, they encouraged me to take a demo.

"A P34.7 model arrived. Straight away, I was impressed. In the meantime, I'd spoken to a farmer who had Merlos for 12 years previous. He had no issues, not even with hydraulic pipes. Before this, I had pretty much accepted it was just the norm for

handlers to be hard on hydraulic hoses. Long story short, a deal was done and the loader never left the yard until it was replaced by a new TF38.7.

"Our current TF42.7 replaced the TF38.7 in 2021. At this point, we pushed up our own silage, so we went for the larger model. But, I always felt that having two handlers would be a luxury, especially for jobs such as loading and unloading bales, to have one in the field and one in the yard.

"With the poultry units, we then required a low machine to work inside and remove the hen dung.

"We set out looking for a good second-hand compact P27.6 model but couldn't find one suitable. In the long run, it made better sense to buy a new machine and so we did," Maurice says.



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Maurice Knowles.



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Engines

Since delivery, the TF42.7 has clocked up 2,400 hours while the P27.6 nears the 1,000-hour mark, all trouble-free hours. Power is something Maurice is happy with when it comes to both machines. The TF42.7 is powered by a 3.6l Deutz four-cylinder engine, which churns out a respectable 143hp.

Meanwhile, the P27.6 is fitted with a 2.5l Kohler four-cylinder engine and produces 75hp. Maurice notes how quiet both machines run, particularly the TF42.7. Upon opening the bonnet, he highlights how accessible all filters and service points are on both machines.

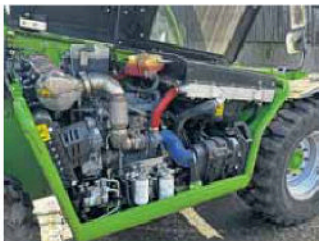
A reversible fan is fitted to the TF42.7 as standard. The larger loader is equipped with a 140l fuel tank, while the P27.6 is fitted with a 70l tank.

Transmissions

Merlo equips all its machines with hydrostatic transmissions as standard. However, particular models can be optioned with the firm's in-house designed stepless CV Tronic alternative.

Maurice's TF42.7 features a two-speed hydrostatic unit. Low range is designed for precise yard operations between 0 and 20km/h. High goes from 0 to 40km/h. Meanwhile, the P27.6 features a single-range 40km/h unit.

The transmission oil circuit is completely independent of the boom's oil circuit. Unlike some brands, Merlo machines do not disengage the drive when you stand on the brakes. Instead, the Ital-



Maurice likes the practical approach Merlo uses for engine bay layout.

ian manufacturer opts to fit a standalone inching pedal.

"The inching pedal gives great control of the transmission in those situations where more hydraulic flow is needed, the shear grab and yard sweeper are two implements where it comes in most handy," Maurice points out.

Having originally come from a power-shift transmission in his previous Manitou's, it took some time to become accustomed to the nature of the hydrostatic unit. Now second nature to Maurice, he wouldn't go back.

The only slight downsides he notes with the dual range transmission are that the high and low range changes cannot be done on the move. Another is the fact that once 40km/h is reached, the limiter engages, causing the engine speed to cut back.

Maurice says that this causes the speed to drop which, in turn, increases engine revolutions per minute (rpm) to speed up again. He would prefer if the loaders maintained a constant 40km/h on the road.

✓ Likes

- Build quality.
- Reliability.
- Split folding door.

✗ Dislikes

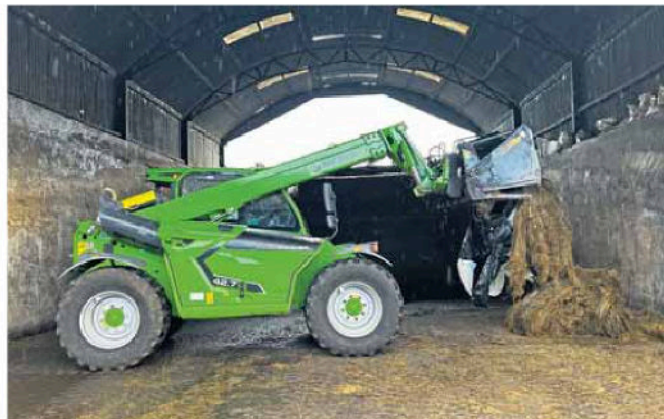
- TF42.7 must be stopped for high/low range changes.



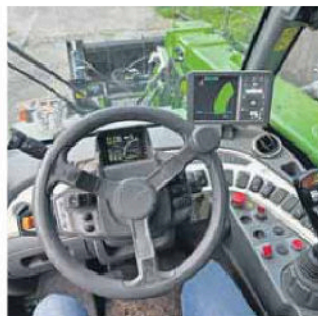
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Maurice's TF42.7 features a 145hp Deutz engine.



Both loaders have spacious cabs offering good visibility and control layout.



The ability to split and latch back the door is a major positive for Maurice.

Build quality and cab

Build quality is where Maurice believes Merlo excels. "They're well thought out. The strength and weight is in the chassis as opposed to hanging of the back in the form of a counterweight, the case with most brands. The tubular 'ring of steel' around the engine bay provides good protection."

The larger machine weighs in at 7,800kg while the smaller loader weighs 4,850kg.

Merlo is unique in the fact that it manufactures 90% of its components under at its factory in Italy. This includes all major components down to the dry planetary axles and hubs fitted to the TF42.7.

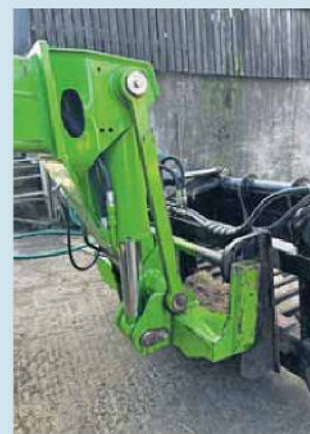
Although fitted with a locking front and rear diff, Merlo opts to use four dry disc brakes per axle for ease of maintenance. The parking brake is automatically engaged when the engine is switched off. Maurice also highlights the strength around the boom and headstock.

To fit what it claims to be one of the widest cabs on the market (1.1m) to all its machines, Merlo slightly offsets the boom and headstock.

“The strength and weight is in the chassis as opposed to hanging of the back in the form of a counterweight

Although his machine is not fitted with the CS cab suspension option, Maurice finds the cab comfortable and quiet. The low positioning of the boom and high positioning of the cab allows for good visibility.

"What I like most about the cab is



The strength within the boom and headstock are two key features for Maurice.

the split door and its ability to open and latch back 180 degrees. The previous Manitou's couldn't do that," Maurice points out.

Control layout and the large dash display were two more praises of Maurice. An 8in CDC display shows all safety information relating to the boom position in real time.

Another neat feature is the boom weight monitor, as standard. Maurice uses this feature to record the weight of feed being loaded into the diet feeder.

The TF42.7 is still fitted with the original Michelin 460/70 R24 Bibload tyres, which he is well impressed by. Stability is another area that impresses Maurice, which he feels is due to Merlo's tendency to distribute weight through the chassis.

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The P27.6 Plus has a maximum lift capacity of 2,600kg and reaches a height of 6m.



Merlo manufactures over 90% of all components in-house including its axles.

Hydraulics and capacities

The TF42.7 is fitted with a load-sensing and flow-sharing 150l/min hydraulic pump. Regardless of the tasks being carried out, hydraulic flow has always proven sufficient, even while on pit duties.

Meanwhile, the P27.6 is fitted with a gear pump delivering 95l/min, again capable of all the tasks on the farm, even those more suited to the larger TF42.7. Cycle times of the TF42.7 at engine idle is quite impressive.

Additional flow capacity

"The P27.6 is well able to handle the 5ft shear grab. However, this is where the additional flow capacity of the larger machine is noticeable, as ex-

pected. Boom suspension and boom soft stop are two features I'd love to see on the P27.6."

When changing the third service hydraulic hoses, Maurice notes that as soon as you remove your hand of the joystick switch, the pressure in the line is completely removed, leaving for a simple swap between implements.

The TF42.7 has a lift height of 7m and maximum rated lift capacity of 4,200kg or a capacity to lift the maximum 4,200kg to 5.6m. Meanwhile, the P27.6 can lift a maximum 2,700kg and reach a maximum height of 5.9m. Combined, the loader can lift the maximum 2,700kg to 4.6m.

VERDICT

"To date, we've been happy with all our Merlo loaders, past and present. They've all worked away trouble-free; no pipes have burst either!

"Running two machines is more of a luxury than a necessity, if I'm honest. In saying that, neither are idle. There is a place for both, especially with the poultry units.

"The P27.6 is a dream to use. For a lot of us on the farm it's the go-to machine. It's easily got into and will practically work in any shed or situation on the farm.

"On the other hand, the comfort and capabilities of the TF42.7 leave it at ease no matter the task. If anything, I would like wider tyres on the P27.6 but it would leave it slightly less manoeuvrable."

Benefit

"Another benefit of running the two is the fact the hours are shared and there will always be a backup machine on farm.

"The only downside is we don't see our neighbour as much now given the fact we don't have to borrow machines when there is a breakdown," Maurice laughs.



The TF42.7 has a built-in weight monitor, which displays the weight of the load placed on the headstock.

*Spec

TF42.7

- ⤵ Engine: four-cylinder, 143hp Deutz engine.
- ⤵ Transmission: 'CVTronic' continuous variable transmission.
- ⤵ Hydraulics: 150 l/min.
- ⤵ Lift capacity at maximum height: 4,200kg.
- ⤵ Max lift height: 7m.
- ⤵ Unladen weight: 8,000kg.
- ⤵ Tyres: Michelin Bibload 460/70 R24
- ⤵ Starting price: €115,245 plus VAT.

P27.6 Plus

- ⤵ Engine: four-cylinder, 75hp Kohler engine.
- ⤵ Transmission: hydrostatic.
- ⤵ Hydraulics: 94 l/min.
- ⤵ Lift capacity at maximum height: 2,700kg.
- ⤵ Max lift height: 5.9m.
- ⤵ Unladen weight: 4,850kg.
- ⤵ Tyres: Mitas 12.0/75 R18.
- ⤵ Starting price: €83,175 plus VAT.

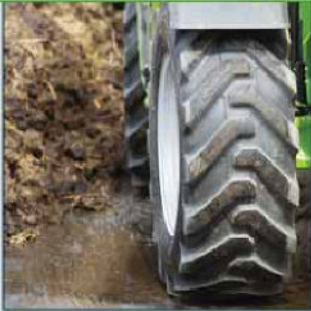
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