

As we discussed last week, there are many qualities to look for when choosing a sire for your cow herd. Before choosing a bull, however, it is important to have a clear understanding of where your operation is currently, and where you would like to see it in the future. In many instances, selecting the right bull can help you to reach your goals. This week we will continue our discussion on bull selection, focusing mainly on phenotype based selection.

One of the most important phenotypic traits to select for in a bull is structural soundness. The bull should not have any structural issues, and should be free from any hoof or bone issues that hinder his ability to travel. A bull should be able to travel to cows that are in heat, and be sound enough to mount the female. Bulls that are lame are profit robbers in an operation- they only lie around and do not breed any cows. Beware also of breed-prominent issues such as curled claws in Brahman influenced breeds. Issues like this may be genetic, and negatively affect the bull's structure and ability to travel.

Bulls should also exhibit a high level of masculinity in their appearance. A bull should look like a bull. The amount of muscling a bull has greatly contributes to his masculine appearance. By taking note of the width between the front legs, and back legs, better known as "base width", a producer can have a better understanding of the amount of muscling the bull has, and will develop in the future. Bulls with poor base width are likely not muscular, and will probably not produce much more muscle in the future. Bone size is also a good trait to select for that contributes to the masculine look that a bull exhibits. Frail boned bulls are not as masculine appearing, and will likely sire calves that will also be frail boned.

The bull's phenotype should also be one that matches the environment he is in. Often, breed is the main determining factor in whether or not this will be achieved to its full potential. The bull should be able to tolerate and perform well in the terrain, weather, and other environmental conditions he is presented with.

Though not phenotypic, there are a few other traits to take into account when deciding upon a bull. What age bull do you want to use? Although older bulls are usually more proven and their progeny may be more predictable, they likely will not last as long in the herd than if you started out with a younger bull. However, you must also take into account the number of females that will be exposed to the bull. It is best to put a 12-18 month old bull on 15-20 cows, a 2 year old bull on 30 cows, and a 3 year old bull and older on 35-40 cows. This allows the average bull to service enough cows to compensate for his presence in the herd, yet does not over work him so that he is losing body condition.

As with any animal, disposition should be taken into careful consideration. Regardless of how "good" a bull is, if he is dangerous to be around, or tears things up on the property, it is hard to justify his existence in the operation. Additionally, as we briefly touched on, the breed of bull is an important thing to decide on. We strongly recommend that you choose a bull that helps you meet your operational goals, and maintain that this is often done by using a breed that best suits your environment.

Lastly, we highly recommend that any breeding age bull you plan to purchase should pass a Breeding Soundness Exam, or BSE, prior to completion of the purchase. This tool helps determine if the bull will be a satisfactory potential breeder. The BSE process includes a physical exam of the bull, and a semen evaluation to determine the bull's fertility. Non-virgin bulls should also test negative for Trichomoniasis

prior to purchase. This venereal disease can quickly cost a producer thousands of dollars, and should be taken very seriously. Any cattle veterinarian can perform a BSE and Trichomoniasis test, and should have results within ten days.

By using each of the phenotypic and genotypic suggestions we have offered, you may better develop a plan for selecting a herd bull. No single trait should be selected for without taking the others into account. With your operation goals and the suggested traits in mind you are well equipped to pick out a bull that is best suited for your cowherd. If you have any questions about bull selection or any of the selection criteria mentioned, please contact us.

Thanks,

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