

Avoid 'Brown Paper Bag' Bull Buys

*Obtain the information
needed to make a wise bull selection.*



by **BARB BAYLOR ANDERSON**

Shopping for a bull should be no different than shopping for seedcorn, asserts Dave Seibert, retired University of Illinois animal systems educator. Speaking at the Beef Sire Selection & Management Seminar in southern Illinois recently, Seibert told producers in attendance that the “brown paper bag” concept doesn’t work. In other words, given the high cost of production, producers should not gamble with using unknown genetics.

“The general concept among some bull buyers is just to look over the fence and apply a visual appraisal when selecting bulls,” he says. “Producers are aware of the need to request and understand information, but they do not always seek or get the information they need. It is the seller’s responsibility to educate buyers when they are purchasing new genetics for their herds, even if buyers do not ask for performance information.”

Seibert suggests bulls should be sold with a “set of recommendations” or “operating instructions.” He distributes a fact sheet about bull management

to buyers of bulls during the Illinois Performance Tested Bull Sale he manages every February. He also knows a few purebred breeders who distribute the fact sheet for their own sales, as well.

“If you buy brown paper bag genetics, you won’t know what you are getting,” he says. “Be an informed buyer; demand performance, fertility and health information. Look for traits lacking in your herd so you can make genetic improvements in performance and calf crop quality.”

In addition to obtaining the information needed to make a wise bull selection, Seibert encourages producers to consider purchasing yearling bulls.

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superior to those born a couple of years earlier, given genetic trends. Financially, it takes \$2,000-2,500 to raise a yearling, and \$2,700-3,200 to raise a 2-year-old. The investment is less, yet yearling bulls could be the most valuable animal on your farm,” he says.

Seibert notes yearlings mature differently than older-age bulls going into service. Yearlings may have an extended useful life, as a lower body weight results in less skeletal stress.

“Yearlings do need special attention. They are still growing and carry less body fat reserves. They are smaller in size and more subordinate to older bulls and big cows, they are sexually inexperienced and their health and body condition are more sensitive to poor nutrition,” he says.

Helpful checklist

Seibert promotes 16 management considerations for producers looking for yearling bulls:

1. Choose adequate age and development. Yearling bulls need maturity and size at the start of the breeding season and should be a minimum 15 months of age. Seibert suggests producers match the start of heifer breeding season with the bull’s birth month when purchasing a yearling bull. If heifer breeding begins in April or May, buy a January- or February-born bull. If heifer breeding starts in June or July, then buy a bull born at least in March or April to meet the 15-month rule.

2. Purchase bulls 90 days before breeding season. Bulls need time to acclimate to the farm. Condition bulls for breeding season and run any tests deemed necessary.

3. Initially confine a bull for two weeks to a smaller lot or pen. Bulls must acclimate to the new environment.

Producers do not want a bull to run through a fence or jump a gate after getting spooked by new sounds or other animals. Provide some roughage to bulls during this time, but also keep concentrate feed in the ration.

4. Weigh and evaluate the bull’s condition. Set a target weight for age and frame. Most yearling bulls are not excessively fat and other bulls may need more condition. Go into the breeding season with a BCS of 6.

5. Move the bull to a smaller pasture with one or two acres. Provide shelter, shade and bedding. Bulls need exercise to get into athletic shape and harden up before breeding season. Acclimate the bull to a grass-based diet before being turned into the pasture.

6. Expose bull to test heifers. Start 45 days before the breeding season, and use one or two surplus heifers per bull so they obtain experience and exercise. Seibert says producers may also consider using estrous-induced females. Observe the mating and record for returned heat. A breeding soundness evaluation (BSE) will show if the bull is able to settle cows. Libido indicates their willingness to attempt to mount and service females.

7. Determine single or multi-sire group. Bulls of the same size and age should be used together to prevent social dominance by older or larger bulls in the pasture. Young bulls, especially yearlings, should not be expected to compete with older bulls.

8. Bucket or creep-feed bulls. Lush spring or dry summer pastures can result in weight loss. Seibert says if the young bull is chasing females and not consuming feed, he will lose weight and have decreasing sperm production and stamina. Provide the bull with supplemental energy, or bull creeps, to extend condition. Bull creeps (chutes) keep cows from stealing feed. Use 1 pound (lb.) of high-energy feed for every 100 lb. of body weight.

9. Abide by bull-to-female ratio. Ideally, Seibert says use a yearling bull on heifers and first-calf heifers since they are similar size. If you must use a young bull on mature cows, which is not recommended, keep close watch so the bull is not dominated by big boss cows. The rule of thumb is one cow per month of age of the bull up to 3 years of age.

10. Observe mating ability during the breeding season. Probably the most neglected rule, Seibert says producers need to make sure the bull is connecting with females and completing the process. Write down numbers of the females the bull mates, and then check to see if any of the females return to heat.

11. Observe bull condition. When providing additional feed, evaluate the body condition score (BCS) of the bull. Shoulder muscle movement is slightly visible with a score of 6. Never go below BCS 4. (Visit www.cowbcs.info for more information on how to score cattle for body condition.)

12. Manage bulls in extreme heat. Consider only using the bull for night breeding. Work during the coolest time of day and offer access to feed. Hand-mating also is an option.

13. Limit time of breeding season. Seibert says 60 days is ideal, but the season can be extended to 75 days if bull BCS is maintained. If the season is extended, producers should consider hand-mating or rotating bulls in and out.

14. Evaluate BCS at the end of the breeding season. Yearling bulls are still growing, and can require 300 lb.-500 lb. of gain prior to the next breeding season. Seibert advises producers to not wait until just prior to the next season to add weight. Rather, take the time to weigh, evaluate BCS and calculate what is needed to prepare for the following year.

15. Divide bull battery into three groups — mature bulls in good condition, young bulls needing additional condition, and sale bulls that you want to market.

16. Finally, prevent injury during the off-season. Seibert says bulls require plenty of space for exercise in an area that is free of anything that might cause injury. Bulls also need shelter and bedding to prevent “frosted testicle” during winter months, and enough feeder space to allow equal access to feed.