

THE DIGESTIVE TRACT

Tips for buying your next bull

by Dan Shike, University of Illinois



Buying a new bull can be exciting — and a little daunting. Sire selection should be a top priority,

as three generations of sires represent 87.5% of the genetics in your calves.

There are plenty of decisions to be made through the process of finding *the* bull. The more preparation and homework you do leading up to the purchase, the happier you are likely to be with the results.

The first step is to determine what you need in your next herd bull. More than likely you could show up to a sale and pick out the “best” one or two bulls that eventually go on to be the high sellers. The challenge is sorting

through the rest of the bulls to determine which ones meet your needs and fit your budget.

Small operations have the toughest job. If you need to buy a bull to use on heifers that has strong maternal genetics, but you also want breed-leading growth and carcass merit, you’d better be prepared to pay top dollar. For larger operations that are buying multiple bulls, there is less necessity for the do-it-all bull.

Assess what you have

To truly be able to determine what you need in a sire, you need to have a good understanding of your current genetic base and have a clear vision for the goals for your operation.

The cattle industry has historically focused on improving growth and

carcass merit. This is for good reason. We are selling a product. Increasing quantity and quality of the product makes sense.

However, operations that have been around for a long time know that chasing increased production without attention to functional traits is a risky business.

How well are your cows matched to your resources and environment? Cow efficiency, fertility, docility and structural correctness are all essential for cow longevity and sustainable production. If you are concerned about your cow herd’s mature size, reproductive rate, or feet and leg issues, it may be time to

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address these traits with your next bull purchase.

Some of these valuable, functional traits are difficult to measure. Until recently the challenge was limited or no genetic predictions available to assist with selection. With the addition of expected progeny differences (EPDs) for heifer pregnancy (HP), docility (Doc), and foot (Angle) and claw (Claw), there are now more tools to assist with selecting for these traits.

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Where are you going?

In addition to knowing the strengths and weaknesses of your cow herd, it is essential to have a clear direction on what you want to produce. If you retain ownership through the feedlot and haven't been capitalizing on grid premiums, then you obviously do need to focus on improving carcass traits. If carcass merit has been very good on your cattle, yet efficiency and gains are below average, then your selection pressure needs to be on growth and feed efficiency.

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Sorting potential sires

Once you have gone through the exercise of assessing where you are currently with your cow herd and setting some goals for where you want to be in the future, it is time to

start sorting through the available bulls.

The amount of information available to aid your selection has grown exponentially during the last few decades. Actual performance information, including weights, feed intake, ultrasound data and contemporary group ratios, are often available. I also strongly recommend you familiarize yourself with all available EPDs and dollar value indexes (\$Values).

There are plenty of resources available to assist in understanding the new information.

Multi-trait selection indexes combine multiple traits into one index and put an economic value on it. Without indexes, it can be very challenging to sort through all the different EPDs to determine which bull has the best combination of traits.

Take a look

Once you have gone through all of the available information, it is a

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good idea to identify the bulls that would be a really good fit, those that are acceptable, and those that are unacceptable for your operation. However, the job is *not* done.

I am and always will be a big believer in visual appraisal. Regardless of the operation's goals, visual evaluation of feet/legs, testicles and masculinity/ruggedness is essential.

If you plan to keep daughters back, you should place additional emphasis on body and fleshing ability. Phenotypic evaluation should focus on traits that do not have EPDs or that have limited available genetic selection tools.

You have the opportunity to shape the direction of your herd with the purchase of a new herd sire. There are about as many

different philosophies on buying a bull as there are bulls to buy. Some will do most of their selection behind a computer, and some still won't look at any of the available information and will go solely off of how a bull looks.

Figure out what works for you. I recommend having a plan that includes assessing your cow herd strengths and weaknesses, as well as your operation's goals and market strategies to determine your needs. Then familiarize yourself with all available data and genetic selection tools to help identify which bulls are the best fit for you.

Last, but not least, visually appraise the bulls yourself, emphasizing functional traits. Buy the bull that best meets your needs and is still in your budget. |

Editor's note: "The Digestive Tract" is a regular column in the *Angus Beef Bulletin* focused on nutrition for the beef cattle life cycle. Dan Shike is associate professor in animal sciences at the University of Illinois.