

HEALTH & HUSBANDRY

Spring is preseason training for bulls

by Brad White, Kansas State University, Beef Cattle Institute



For baseball enthusiasts, the season never really ends. In the cold winter months, news focuses

around finding the right players to fill needs on your team, which rapidly progresses to early spring training to prepare for the season.

Then, preseason games serve as an initial test to determine if the team is ready to play well. Finally, the season kicks off, but training and monitoring continue because the goal is for all players to make it through the season healthy and productive.

We may only think of our bulls just before and during breeding season; however, just like your favorite baseball team, the bull battery needs preseason preparation. Important questions to consider in the off-season include:

- ▶ Do we have the correct bulls?
- ▶ Are they ready for breeding?
- ▶ Do we have a plan to ensure continued productivity throughout the breeding season?

Hot stove league

Do you have the right bulls? The interim between selling last year's calf crop and the start of the next breeding season is a great time to reflect on the current bull battery and to evaluate keeping the current bulls or purchasing new ones. No bull is the best at every trait, and the key is to identify the best fit for your herd.

We may have genetic data — expected progeny differences (EPDs) or pedigree information — on our bulls, but not usually on the cows in the commercial herds. Ideally, we can evaluate the performance of the previous calf crop(s) to determine how the bulls performed

with these cows and identify opportunities for improvement.

The performance of the calf crop can be judged by various means. Select the most important variables based on your marketing and management plans. Criteria for bull selection are numerous, and identifying specific traits important to your herd helps focus the selection pressure in the correct areas.

Our ability to quantify expected genetic potential of bulls is expanding. This is a great chance to visit with your local breed representative, extension agent or university personnel. Several online resources are also available to learn more about comparisons among bulls to lead to the appropriate sire selection.

This annual bull battery evaluation may not result in a change; however, the value is in going through the assessment and planning process.

Preseason training

Are your bulls ready for breeding season? Bulls have been described as the athlete of the herd. Like any athlete competing at a high level, off-season training is a critical component of success.

Important considerations for bulls include adequate mobility and good body condition. This is a good time to assess feet and legs to identify any potential issues that need to be addressed before breeding.

Bulls are often turned into breeding pastures in the spring, and the diet transitions from stored forages and feeds to a primarily grazing diet. While the fresh, green grass provides great nutrition, the bull is also working and expending a lot of calories during the breeding season.

To prepare for this activity, we want the bulls to be in good shape [a body condition score (BCS)

of 5-6 on a 9-point scale] prior to the start of the breeding season.

If we need to feed bulls additional ration to have them gain weight prior to breeding, be sure to plan the transition so they do not have to make a quick change from a high-percentage concentrate diet in a dry lot on one day to a full grazing diet in open pasture the next day.

The preseason training for the bull concludes with a final test: the breeding soundness examination (sometimes referred to as a BSE). This comprehensive evaluation includes passing criteria for general health, feet and leg soundness, normal testicular size and shape, and adequate quality of semen.

Even if the bull performed well last year, it has been many months since the last breeding season. Testing bulls annually is a good idea. The breeding soundness examination provides a report on the bull and his physical capabilities to breed today. While the system is not perfect, this is a great way to assess bulls prior to the breeding season.

Because things can change over time, I recommend testing the bull as close to the breeding season as possible, yet enough in advance of first breeding that you have enough time to make a change as needed.

In addition to the breeding soundness examination, please consult with your veterinarian if there are other diagnostic tests or preventative health procedures that may be important to perform at this time.

In-season maintenance

Do you have a plan to ensure continued productivity? After the bulls have been turned with the cows, continued monitoring of bull performance is a good idea.

Breeding activities and multiple-bull paddocks can lead to injuries

that limit the bull's ability to perform as expected. Fortunately, many of these issues can be observed visually by taking time to evaluate the bull during the season.

The in-season evaluation can be done by observing the bull at least weekly to evaluate his mobility, current body condition and any signs of trauma to the reproductive tract. I set a schedule to generate the habit of really looking at the bulls during breeding season.

At each evaluation be sure you see the bull move without any impairments, evaluate BCS, and visually assess the testicles and ventral midline (belly near penis and prepuce) for any abnormal swellings.

Bulls frequently lose weight during the breeding season. Our goal is to be sure they maintain adequate body condition to maintain performance. In-season evaluations can lead to early identification of potential problems and allow replacements as needed.

Conclusions

Managing the bull battery is critical to long-term herd productivity and success. An annual evaluation of the current overall breeding plan and previous performance is important to ensure the best strategy for long-term success.

Create a preseason plan to manage bulls, including appropriate nutrition, that concludes with passing a breeding soundness examination.

Finally, establish a monitoring plan to identify any problems that may occur during the breeding season. I hope everyone has a great breeding season! ■

Editor's note: Author Brad White is on faculty at Kansas State University College of Veterinary medicine and serves as director of the Beef Cattle Institute. To learn more, tune in to the weekly BCI *Cattle Chat* podcast.