

Sound Decisions

The most basic principle producers have to remember about raising, buying and managing bulls is that they have to cover a lot of terrain, a lot of miles and a lot of cows.

Story by

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One topic upon which commercial cow-calf operators, seedstock producers, university experts and even feedlot operators can agree is that soundness plays an important role in their programs. For many, soundness is an animal's most important trait. Unfortunately, there is no expected progeny difference (EPD), no quantified way, to measure how sound a bull is.

Sure, some of the bull studs publish progeny evaluations of muscling, capacity, rear leg structure, sheath, etc., to help evaluate sires, but how do you evaluate individual bulls on sale day? How much depends on the environment in which the bulls were raised and not on the genetics? How much of evaluating soundness is purely subjective?

For commercial cow-calf producers Bob Williams and Mitt French, who manage cows on ranches where the elevation ranges from 400 feet (ft.) to 6,300 ft., the terrain changes from sandy to rocky and the climate from hot in the summer to freezing in the winter, it's simple. Bulls have to be sound. It is their No. 1 concern when they purchase bulls.

"The bulls have to get around on our ranch. It is a long ways, sometimes 2 miles, to get to water," says Williams, ranch manager for GI Ranch of Paulina, Ore. "It can be rocky, and it can be hot."

At GI Ranch, 4,200 head of cows are exposed to bulls every year. "All our cows calve in the spring," Williams says, "and we run 20 cows to a bull." They brand their bulls with the year they were born and the year they went into service, planning to keep them for about five years.

"It's hard to keep bulls healthy in our area," he says. "We have problems with foot rot and fighting." By starting out with sound bulls, they have been able to minimize many of these problems.

French, president of Las Aguilas Corp., which owns San Benito Cattle Co. in Hollister, Calif., says 80% of their ranch is in rough country.

"We go from rolling to steep hills, and



What good are expected progeny differences (EPDs), birth weights and weaning weights if the bulls can't get to the cows?

the bulls have to travel," French says, explaining that they try to give bulls 30 days in the flat area to adjust. "These bulls will run in rough country and in large fields. Sometimes our cow-to-bull ratio gets down to 16-to-1." In places, they can run 25 cows with one bull; but for the majority of this vast ranch, it is rough country, and soundness is a primary concern.

"I try to buy most of the bulls myself," French says. "Soundness is a No. 1 priority, but one problem I have is that most bulls are shown in a confined area, with too many bulls per pen. Sometimes it is hard to tell how sound they are."

Ideally, French thinks buyers should see bulls before sale day, but he knows —

as in his own case — that it is hard to make the time to do that. "It would be nice if bulls could be in bigger pens, with less bulls per pen, and in pens that have been together for a long period of time."

French says he'd also prefer if bulls were run in more demanding environments prior to being sold. He explains that it is like a young colt raised in the mountains. That colt will be much more likely to survive in the mountains later in life than one that was raised in a more pampered environment.

Genetics or environment?

Is soundness a genetic issue or an envi-



The size and shape of the foot is another concern for bull soundness.

ronmental issue? According to professional cattle judges Randy Perry, California State University, Fresno (CSUF); Dave Daley, California State University, Chico (CSUC); and Tom Hill, Oregon State University, it begins with good genetics but ends with a solid management program.

“Soundness becomes even more of an issue in the West because we have bigger country, rougher terrain and larger areas,” Perry says.

One of the reasons bulls go unsound is because they are too straight- or too post-legged, Perry says. “This lends itself to joints’ developing fluid and swelling up. There is not enough cushion in the joints.”

He believes this problem begins with genetics and that bulls that are developed too quickly, on too hot of feed, will develop more problems. “I don’t know of any evidence that says bulls who are developed too quickly will have long-term effects, but they will surely not hold up as well in strenuous breeding situations.”

Hill agrees. He says that how bulls are developed goes a long way toward how sound they are at sale time and how well they will stand up to the test of time.

“Genetics are No. 1,” Hill says, “but those bulls who are not developed right are more predisposed to having problems on down the line.” Hill believes that when you see fat deposition in a bull’s brisket area you need to evaluate the bull a little closer — whether you’re buying or selling.

“Clearly, a lot of the issues we see are

because of how the bulls were developed,” Daley says. And it’s an issue of what bull buyers demand. “They want heavy weights, and in order to get those weights, bulls are fed hard on soft ground,” he says. This is going to lend itself not only to leg problems, but foot problems, too.

The size and shape of the foot is another concern for bull soundness. Again, these experts say, a lot depends on how the bulls are managed. Are their feet trimmed? How soft is the ground on which they have been developed? How hard have they been fed? All of these factors affect foot growth.

Daley says susceptibility to subsequent foot problems is similar to a horse’s foundering. If bulls are managed in muddy conditions, their feet get soft, and it takes a long time for them to harden.

“It is another genetic component that is influenced by management,” he says.

Perry says bulls that have had their feet trimmed are more likely to have problems later. “Someone once said that the best place to trim feet is between the head and neck,” he says.

Producers must realize that what looks good in the showing — straight, level top; straight hind leg; straight hip — doesn’t necessarily translate to what can travel over rough terrain.

“The old-timer wanted a bull who was droopy-rumped and had some set in his legs,” Perry says. “There is nothing wrong with this type of bull.” In fact, these experts agree, if they had to choose between the straight, level type and the

old-timer’s choice, they would go with the not-so-pretty, more-functional bull.

That said, the experts all agree that the showing has never been closer to the commercial industry than it is today.

“Bulls have to be correct,” Perry says. “They have to have an adequate amount of flex in their joints and be big-footed. Bulls also need a tight, neat sheath and show an adequate amount of depth and spring of rib to be sound,” he says.

“For me,” Hill says, “the biggest sign is if the bull can cover his front track with his rear foot.” This is a pretty simple and easy way to tell if a bull is sound. “A question you can ask yourself is, does the bull maintain integrity of dewclaw when he moves off his hind leg, and does he have extra set to his pastern? A mistake many people make is being too critical of a bull that has more set in his hind leg. This is less detrimental than a bull that is too straight.”

Hill asks himself this same question whether he is evaluating a pen of range bulls for his judging team or whether he is the official judge at a show.

Daley agrees and says too much set is not a significant problem under range conditions. “I am not fond of looking at bulls who have too much set, but there is no data to show that these bulls are not sound.”

Mobility in the front shoulder is important when bulls are evaluated for soundness, Daley says. A short-strided bull will be less likely to survive in the commercial world.

Since there’s not an EPD and there’s usually not any data given as to how sound the bull is, what exactly do you do?

According to Daley, who says he is not a risk-taker, look for bulls with high accuracies and seek the oldest daughters of the bulls you can find before using them. You will find out many more factors than just how sound they are. More than likely, progeny of these cows, if they are managed right, will be sound, functional bulls.

Buy your seedstock from registered breeders who have good reputations and who perhaps develop their bulls in country similar to your herd’s. Most importantly, customer and seedstock source have to communicate with each other.

Strict culling

Located near Central Point, Ore., Rogue River Ranch encompasses three separate ranches in two states. With close to 1,500 head, Rogue River Ranch and Dick Hubman, the man behind its success, sell quite a few bulls each year.

“Selling range bulls is the most important part of our program,” Hubman says.

Bulls are developed with their future soundness in mind, then strictly culled.

The bulls are fed a high-roughage ration that consists of ranch-raised corn silage mixed with alfalfa hay. The bulls are developed on 6 pounds (lb.) of grain per day to gain a targeted 3 lb./day, Hubman explains. The ration is adjusted depending on gains and weather.

The bulls spend 100 days on feed and are in shape to turn out the day after they are sold. "The bulls are fed this high-roughage ration so they are able to realize their potential rate of gain," Hubman says. "Our bulls show 80% of their genetic potential with this type of feeding situation."

Not every bull will make their sale, Hubman says. "I go through all the bulls, and the first thing I look at is structure. If the bulls do not have sound feet and legs, they simply won't work for our buyers."

Hubman says he'll see more front-end problems, explaining that rear-leg structure rarely presents a problem in their bulls. "These bulls [those weak in the front end] aren't able to handle the extra weight and don't make the cut for the sale."

If Hubman finds any corns, the bull is cut from the sale. If he sees a foot that has grown unevenly, the bull is cut.

"We start with 235 bulls on test and eliminate down to around 200," Hubman says, adding that bulls are cut for more reasons than structural problems. Reproductive evaluations, scrotal measurements, semen tests, weights and injuries also play a role in determining which bulls make the sale and which do not.

"We have never replaced a bull for structure," Hubman says, explaining he would do so if the occasion ever arose. He hopes, however, to find those problems before they become problems for someone else.

"Our bulls are not overconditioned; they don't get their feet trimmed; and they are guaranteed to be sound breeders," says Hubman, who agrees bull development can be detrimental to soundness. "Ideally I would like to be able to feed our bulls in bigger lots with less mud, but we don't have that luxury here. Some of our bulls don't make the sale for that reason."

What does Hubman look for when he walks through his pens?

"I look for bulls with a big foot, deep heel and the correct angle in pasterns. I like to see a 45-degree angle to the shoulder; if they are too straight, they knuckle over in their knees," he says. "The bulls should have a nice, natural set to their hock. I like to see a little flex and for the bulls to take a nice, long stride. You need to look for swelling in their joints and for the correct angle from their shoulder down to their knee and finally to their front foot."

Careful development

The Borrer family of Tehama Angus Ranch, Gerber, Calif., expects bull progeny to work in range conditions.

"We expect our bulls to go out and breed cows and come back in decent shape," says Aaron Borrer, adding that his family guarantees bulls to breed cows.

"We sell yearlings and 18-month-old bulls in our sale," Borrer says. "We don't trim any feet, and [we] eliminate bulls from the sale we feel are not structurally correct." Last year, they didn't sell two good bulls because they were wearing their hooves unevenly. "This may present problems down the road," he says, explaining that it's easier to eliminate the problem than deal with the consequences.

The Borrers develop their bulls in 8- to 15-acre pens. The bulls have to travel to get to water, feed and shade.

"The bulls get quite a bit of exercise," says Borrer, who feels this is important to the proper development of their bulls. "I wouldn't want to feed our bulls any harder than we do," he adds, explaining that more fat in the scrotum reduces the cooling ability of the testicles.

A few years ago they noticed calves by a particular bull had more fluid in their joints. "These bulls tended to be fatter," Borrer says. They stopped using this bull because they felt his calves were not sound enough to sell. "If the bulls don't go out and add value to the commercial herd, then they have no business being in our herd."

The right type

Dave Peterson, manager of Lark Angus Ranch in Powell Butte, Ore., says they provide a 100% guarantee for one year on the bulls they sell — no matter what happens. This 500-head operation

markets their bulls to northern California, Oregon and Idaho.

"We develop our bulls in large traps with lots of rocks and trees," Peterson says.

The ranch, owned by Ray and Lita Kilpatrick, is located 5 miles north of Powell Butte. "We sell a lot of our bulls to operations that run their cattle on government ground," Peterson says. "This means they have to cover a lot of ground, and in our program it's more type than EPDs or anything else."

Peterson wants to raise bulls that are the right type. "It's not a question of how big they are or if they had 80 pounds of yearling growth," he says. Buyers look at structure closely; there are some things people will accept and some things they won't. "An example is bulls that are too straight-legged or have too much set. For one rancher it's OK; for another it's not."

Peterson knows one thing, though. He wants his bull customers to return and will do whatever it takes to make them happy.

"A few years ago I fed a concentrated ration that got the bulls too fat," Peterson says, explaining he was trying to get the heavy weights. "I learned my lesson and have gone back to a high-roughage ration with a limited amount of grain. We start slowly with chopped hay. At 11 months of age, we increase the grain to 10 to 12 pounds and still develop bulls who will weigh 1,150 pounds at yearling time."

"You have to preach what you believe in," Peterson says. "Plus, you have to be in contact with your customers so you know what they need. This is why I know what our customers like; I talk to them. They tell me they like the bulls this way."

