



Beef Talk

by **Kris Ringwall**, *Extension beef specialist, North Dakota State University*

Let's check the bull pen

Walking the harsh prairie and fighting incoming snowflakes that accelerate with each wind gust is a difficult task, but it is one that needs to be done as last year's bulls are slowly and methodically reviewed.

If this were baseball season, the bull pen would get a lot of attention. In fact, at times, many fans and baseball experts would review the players and their accompanying stats in a speculative fashion as the coach pondered his lineup for each inning of the game. Who's the coach going to pick?

About the same time spring baseball kicks into gear, cattle producers find themselves admiring their own bull pens. Last year's winter scouting season may not have worked out for every bull desired; however, the pen looks good and, just like the baseball coach, producers are excited to turn their bull pens out and see how they perform.

Off-season care

What does this have to do with today? We're still a ways away from the

excitement of spring bull turnout. But that's the point. Fall and winter blues seem to dampen the excitement. The end result? The bull pen often goes unnoticed in the off-season. Last spring's shining stars are out roughing it, and as Old Man Winter puffs and blows, the bulls run for cover.

Unfortunately, bulls often are forgotten because attention is turned to the hustle and bustle of selling premium calves, followed by preparing maternity pens for all those nice cows. Pregnant cows are in demand, but they would not be pregnant if it weren't for the fertile bulls last summer. Each time the cows pass through the examination chute, the cringe hits when the local veterinarian hollers "open" and good old 6410 has to go.

So, the question of the day is: "How are those bulls doing?"

A reporter called the other day, wondering if there was a story on the cold weather and its effect on nursing cows. I noted that most cows are not nursing calves in December, except for a few fall-calving cows, but there certainly

is a story regarding bulls and proper winter management.

Winters are tough on bulls. Bulls that are left behind the barn to fend for themselves, or left to compete with a whole herd of boss cows for feed, could be weak and poorly nourished in the spring. In addition, exposure to extreme winter weather may result in frozen scrotums. Lack of off-season care may result in low fertility at spring turnout.

Winter checkup

The other day, the Dickinson Research Extension Center bulls were brought in for a checkup and weighed. There certainly was a difference between the older and younger bulls.

Comparing bulls of one breed, five yearling bulls averaged 1,416 pounds (lb.), with four having body condition scores (BCSs) of 5 and one having a BCS of 6. Four 2-year-old bulls averaged 2,003 lb., all having a BCS of 7. Eight 3-year-old bulls averaged 2,344 lb., with one having a BCS of 5, three with BCSs of 6 and four with BCSs of 7.

The yearlings averaged 1,282 lb. last

spring, so they obviously are still growing. In comparison to last year's weights, the yearlings averaged 1,418 lb., compared with 1,416 lb. this year. The 2-year-olds averaged 1,928 lb., compared with 2,003 lb. this year.

Don't forget about the bulls. In general, with the value of beef, now is the time to evaluate, treat for external parasites and turn questionable bulls into cash. The center's bulls were doing fine, but three still went to market. One bull went for bad feet, one for poor performance and one for standing "his" ground a little too aggressively.

Your comments are always welcome at www.BeefTalk.com. For more information contact the North Dakota Beef Cattle Improvement Association (NDBCIA), 1133 State Ave., Dickinson, ND 58601, or go to www.CHAPS2000.com. In correspondence about this column, refer to BT0279.



Editor's Note: Addressing the past, present and future state of the beef cattle business, "Beef Talk" is a weekly column distributed by the North Dakota State University (NDSU) Agricultural Communication office. Ringwall is executive secretary of the NDBCIA, director of the Dickinson Research Extension Center and an NDSU Extension beef specialist. An archive of columns can be found at www.BeefTalk.com, and your comments are always welcome.