

# Bull Management: Tips for Successful Turnout

Story by  
**HEATHER SMITH THOMAS**

Good management is just as important for bulls as for the cow herd. When you make an investment in bulls, you want them to work well for you. Bulls need to be ready for breeding, with proper body condition for endurance and no lameness or fertility problems, since it's important to get a high percentage of the cows bred and settled during their first cycle.

Bulls purchased out of sales have often been fed heavily and *must* be acclimated and exercised before you turn them out with cows, says Lucy Rechel of Snyder Livestock, Yerington, Nev. Rechel manages a bull-growing operation for customers from across the West.

"If you immediately turn them out on range, or even into a pasture, without any time to get in better athletic shape, you're heading for a wreck," she says. Bulls need to be in large lots or pastures so they can get plenty of exercise on the type of feed and under the same conditions they will encounter in their breeding pastures. You can't expect a bull to go out and cover a lot of territory if he's been penned up all winter, getting fat, with no exercise. When buying new bulls just before breeding season, try to choose bulls that are not overconditioned.

Alex Peterson of Windmill Ranch, near Haigler, Neb., says there's a lot of competition in the Angus breed right now to get as much weight as possible on young

bulls, since many buyers want bulls that top the gain tests.

You can't expect an overconditioned bull that isn't in shape to do a physically taxing job, he says.

## Preventing injuries

Putting young, fat bulls with more fit, older bulls may also lead to injuries, though younger bulls may be too timid to do much fighting with older ones.

"Generally, the young bulls tend to heckle and ride the older bulls rather than actually try to fight them," Rechel says. A period of adjustment, putting new bulls in with the rest of the bulls before they all go out with cows, is usually better than just turning them all out with cows. They tend to fight worse when there are females around than when put into a bull pasture together.

They'll fight when new bulls are mixed with older ones, but if they have room and good footing, risks for injury are less than if they are contained in a corral. A corral with frozen, uneven ground or wet, boggy conditions can be a dangerous place for bulls to fight and could lead to strained or broken legs. A corral fence corner where a bull might be trapped while fighting other bulls is also a hazard.

The safest way to introduce new bulls to a group is to give them plenty of room. A pasture or meadow is always better than a corral.

"Feed in a large area, and put feedbunks out in the open where there's plenty of room," Peterson



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says, adding that he feeds in old tires turned inside out. "Sometimes an older bull will throw a younger bull over the bunk, and you don't want injuries."

Peterson recommends providing enough bunks that every bull can find space to eat. "The dominant bull will have one trough to himself," he says.

"Regarding bulls fighting and finding their social order, it's best to have separate breeding groups for the young bulls and older bulls, rather than mixing them," Rechel says. "If you have such rough range conditions you are not sure yearling bulls can get the job done, you can't do that, but in smaller pastures or easy country this often works well to put the young bulls in one section and the older bulls elsewhere."

## Nutrition

"If you use young bulls, also remember they need more groceries between breeding seasons than older bulls," Rechel says.

"That first breeding season will knock the weight off them, and if you can pull them out 60 days into the season and get them back on feed, they'll do a lot better than if you leave them out all summer and fall with the cows," she says. "Their chances of being functional the next year will be much better." If a bull is too thin coming out of winter, he won't have the energy to breed all the cows that need to be serviced, and he may be less fertile.

Peterson says young bulls shouldn't be neglected after breeding season; they need enough nutrition during winter to keep growing.

"They may be beat up pretty bad from their first summer breeding cows, and if they come into the new breeding season a little thin, they never catch up," he says. "Yearling bulls used for breeding heifers may be very worn down. You can't leave

a young bull with heifers very long or he'll be run ragged. Part of good management is taking good care of them the first year."

Any bull with a problem at the end of a breeding season, such as sore feet, should be taken care of immediately, Peterson adds. If his feet hurt all winter, he won't gain weight like he should.

Ken Dunn, who raises registered Angus near Teton, Idaho, says preparation for breeding season should actually begin the fall before.

"We tell our bull customers they should separate young bulls from the cows right after breeding season, and if possible keep them separate from the older bulls," Dunn says. "This really helps them recover from their first breeding season."

Dunn says many ranchers make the mistake of not caring for a young bull during the winter to ensure he gains weight. "He goes into the next breeding season in poor condition and won't service cows as well as he should," he explains. "He's still trying to grow. Young bulls need to be fed separate from the cows and from the older bulls."

Another common mistake is overfeeding mature bulls, Dunn says. "They need a different ration because it's easy for them to get too fat." An overconditioned bull may be more sluggish and have more problems getting around to all the cows.

"It's also unwise to make big changes in your feeding program just before breeding season," Dunn cautions. "You should have a consistent feed program through winter — to either grow the young bulls or maintain the mature ones — so that just before breeding there's not that much adjustment they'll have to make."

How much you pamper the young bulls and what you feed before breeding season will depend

## Tips from a commercial producer

John Falen, a rancher in northern Nevada, minimizes bull problems by keeping his bulls the same age. He starts with yearlings, buying a few extra to make sure he has enough to make up for any that get injured or have problems. Four years later he replaces them all. This solves some of the problems that can arise with multiple-bull pastures.

"If you had any low-grade infections spread by breeding (trichomoniasis, vibriosis, etc.) when you sell every bull, you eliminate that reservoir of infection and start fresh with virgin yearling bulls," he says.

Bulls always fight, but when they run together from the time they are yearlings, there's less problem with injuries. These bulls have lived together from the beginning and have their social order established. Falen's bulls are managed together in winter when they are not with the cows.

"When we turn them out with cows, we turn a few out here and a few out there, and they are well-scattered in a lot of country, so there's not much fighting," he says.

"If you buy a lot of bulls, like we do, you probably can't get them all at the same place, Falen says. "So you are mixing groups of bulls from different sales or breeders. Sometimes we wait until we turn them outside before we throw them together, so they have more room to settle their differences. For the most part we generally just put them all together in a big meadow and feed them out there, and they have time to adjust before we turn them out with the cows."

on how early you calve. Bulls used in April and May (for calving in January and February) will have different feed requirements than bulls used later. A bull that won't be put with cows until June or later (for an April-May calving season) can be on good grass by then and won't need much extra feed. If bulls go on grass pastures early in the season, however, when the grass is still washy, they'll need supplementation to make sure nutrient levels are adequate — until the grass is better a few weeks later.

### **Vaccinations**

People often buy bulls from sales, and though the bulls have had vaccinations and semen tests, producers still need to insist on finding out which shots they've had.

"They need to know they are covered for diseases in their area," Rechel says. If the bull has not had all the shots you'd give your cattle, see if you can make arrangements to have him vaccinated before delivery, or make sure he is vaccinated as soon as you get him home, she adds.

### **Parasite control**

Peterson uses a pour-on for parasites in the fall, and again in the spring, about a month before turnout with the cows. "Even if there's no indication of internal parasites in stool samples, I like to pour them twice a year, just to make sure they don't have any," Peterson says.

Fly control is also important. "Right before breeding season we use a topical delice and fly control," Dunn says. "We tried the insecticide ear tags, but found that right before we breed is the heaviest fly problem. So we use a really cheap topical fly/delice product we spray on the bulls before turnout. We don't run them through a chute; we just run them down the alley and spray them.

"It really helps with flies and gives the bulls about four weeks of relief — which gets them through the first breeding cycle on the cows without having to worry about flies," Dunn says.

### **Breeding soundness exam**

When buying a bull, ask to see semen test results to know if a complete breeding soundness exam (sometimes referred to as a BSE) was done.

"Some of the people doing semen testing for a sale only check to make sure there are live sperm in the sample. They don't look at the motility (how many are moving), morphology (defects in the actual sperm cells), the percent of live sperm or abnormal sperm," Rechel says.

Physical examination of reproductive organs is also important. "Some of the people checking bulls don't palpate the testicles to make sure they are both sound, nor check the inguinal rings, etc.," she says. "It is up to the bull buyer to demand to see the semen test/breeding soundness exam results."

Scrotal shape (and health of testes) is as important as scrotal circumference, she notes. You want the bull to last several years and to be fertile. A breeding soundness evaluation of all your bulls before breeding season can tell you if

one has had an infection or injury that makes him infertile, and you can make sure you didn't end up with a frostbite problem.

Examination of the bull should include feet and legs, to make sure he doesn't have a problem that might keep him from breeding cows. He must be sound and able to travel. Keeping a bull healthy and sound is part of good management through the year.

"It's all too easy to forget about bulls during the off season, not checking them closely enough," Dunn says. If a bull is lame with foot rot for a prolonged period of time, for instance, he may be infertile later (due to fever) or even become crippled from permanent damage if the infection gets into the joint. Eye injuries and infections are another example. If a bull is visually impaired on one side,

he may lose status in the pecking order or become timid about breeding cows because he's less able to defend himself from another bull.

Paying attention to bulls and taking care of little problems before they become big ones is good management. Protect your investment in better genetics and assure a successful turnout with the cows.

