

# Stud Worthy

*What does it take to get a bull into a bull stud?*

*by Troy Smith, field editor*

It is a feather in the cap of the seedstock breeder whose bull is chosen by a bull stud. Capturing the attention of one of the firms that market semen for artificial insemination (AI) certainly suggests a breeder is doing something right.

Getting a bull into an AI sire directory is pretty good advertisement for the breeder and, of course, there's the money. Selling a bull, or an interest in him, to a bull stud can be lucrative.

It's not surprising, therefore, that many breeders aspire to raise the kind of bull that bull studs seek. Is that a worthy or realistic aspiration? If so, what kind or kinds of bulls will fill the bill?

We asked four bull-stud representatives — actually involved in sire acquisition — to share their thoughts.

## Don Trimmer

**Beef Sales Manager, Alta Genetics, Watertown, Wis.**

In the more than 20 years that Don Trimmer has been involved with sire acquisition, formerly with Accelerated Genetics and now with Alta Genetics, he's been contacted by many seedstock producers with a common sales pitch. Those hopeful breeders thought their particular "best bull we ever raised" would be a valuable addition to any bull stud's directory.



PHOTO BY WASEY BROWN

*"Relatively few breeders raise bulls that become really successful AI sires, and only a handful of those breeders ever raise more than one or two high-echelon sires," says Cody Sankey. "To make it a priority is like swinging for the fence on every pitch. You're probably going to be disappointed."*

Trimmer typically responded with a question of his own, asking each breeder if their respective outstanding individual would be used at home. A surprising number of breeders admitted they weren't sure whether their candidate would enhance their own breeding programs.

"I always ask a breeder to consider whether they would, if they did not own the bull, pay \$20 or \$30 [per AI dose] for his semen," says Trimmer. "If not, why would the bull be valuable to the industry?"

Over the years, says Trimmer, many bulls have been promoted on

the basis of a particular trait, and many AI sires were chosen because semen buyers were focused on a single trait, whether it be weaning or yearling weight, a carcass trait such as marbling or ribeye area, or a selection index. Too many producers chased extremes.

Trimmer says that has changed, for the most part. He notes how the majority of Angus semen is purchased by commercial cattlemen, and much of it is used to breed heifers. Most of these semen customers are seeking sires offering a balance of traits.

"I think a majority of semen customers are looking for sires that offer fertility, calves born unassisted and acceptable performance

to weaning. They want average or better performance in calves of a nice, uniform type. They want consistency," states Trimmer.

"It's not extreme cattle at the top that make their operations profitable. It's the cattle who fail to perform and are sorted off that costs the most money," he adds.

According to Trimmer, sought-after sires come with a full complement of information — weights, expected progeny differences (EPDs), genomic profile and ultrasound data. How a sire ranks within the breed does matter, and substantial weaknesses, for any

trait, are the reasons that semen customers turn away.

“The most widely used AI sires typically are not extreme for any particular trait, and few have ever sired a Denver (National Western Stock Show) champion,” says Trimmer. “They are sires that do a lot of things right and don’t cause problems.”

## Aaron Arnett

**Director of Beef Genetics, ST Genetics, Navasota, Texas**

“Certainly, the Angus population is big enough that it offers a lot of choices. There is more diversity right now than any other time during my career — more differences of opinion, too,” says Arnett.

“Many people are very passionate about their preferences, whether they’re asking for a cow-maker kind of bull, or an elite carcass sire, or a high ‘dollar-beef’ (beef value index, \$B) bull,” he adds, noting how genomically enhanced EPDs and selection indexes help identify individuals that are genetically superior for various traits.

While extreme numbers can be tempting, Arnett believes the most successful AI sires are those having broad appeal as a result of combining calving ease, adequate growth and a respectable profile of carcass traits.

However, Arnett believes producer emphasis on certain traits is “plateauing” to some degree —

calving ease for example. It’s not that producers consider calving ease any less important, but it has become easier to get.

According to Arnett, young bulls ranking near breed average for calving ease generally offer a very high measure of unassisted births in heifers. He thinks the industry may be reaching a “biological optimum” for calving ease and other traits, as well.

“If we’re talking about a growth trait, such as yearling weight, we’re seeing some EPDs climb north of 150. That raises questions about what that does to mature cow size and cow maintenance costs,” says Arnett. “I think we all have to be sensitive to biological optimums.”

Of course, the customer is always right, so Arnett is always looking for sires whose semen will sell, and pedigree matters. Popular bloodlines with names that cattlemen recognize lend marketability.

To be successful as an AI sire, a bull must look the part. While visual evaluation can be pretty subjective, Arnett claims there is no denying the

importance of eye appeal that can be captured on a bull’s best day for photo display in a bull stud directory.

Arnett says his phenotypic evaluation of stud-bull candidates now includes increased emphasis on structural integrity, starting at ground level. He calls foot soundness a must-have characteristic that, in some genetic lines, needs improvement. Arnett looks forward to the coming introduction of an Angus EPD to aid selection for foot structure.

“Environment certainly is a factor with some foot problems, where bulls are fed high-energy diets that make them too fat and lead to long toes. But an EPD will be a way to evaluate the genetic component,” offers Arnett.

## Ben Lohmann

**Beef Sire Acquisition Manager, ABS Global, DeForest, Wis.**

While ABS serves multiple markets within the beef industry, Ben Lohmann says commercial cow-calf producers comprise a significant portion of the customer base. Within that large segment of customers, a majority of producers source semen that is used to breed virgin heifers. So, it’s no surprise that calving ease is a priority.

With that said, Lohmann believes commercial customers increasingly take a practical, business-like approach to AI sire selection. Since most raise their own replacement females, they are also interested in sires strong in maternal traits, but

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PHOTO BY SHAUNA ROSE HERNIMEL



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they also want to further traits that enhance product value.

“I believe they view balanced trait selection as the way to achieve whole-herd profitability,” states Lohmann.

He sees more customers giving increased consideration to mature cow size — not necessarily with a goal of reducing it, but keeping cow size in check. There is greater interest in moderate milk EPDs and feed efficiency.

“Feed efficiency is not just a feedlot trait,” says Lohmann. “It impacts the cow herd as well, and cattlemen know that feed costs represent a major portion of their total production costs.”

So how does a bull stud acquire sires offering a balance of maternal and performance traits? Lohmann admits it isn’t easy.

“We find them in sale [books], online and through direct contact with breeders. When a breeder approaches us (regarding a candidate), I always try to look into it and give them our consideration,” explains Lohmann, adding that data

from the Angus Sire Alliance is useful in identifying AI sire candidates.

“But getting a bull in an AI sire [directory] probably shouldn’t be a breeder’s goal,” advises Lohmann. “If a breeder strives to meet his or her customers’ needs, breeds cattle that contribute to customer profitability, and does it consistently — well, we will find them and their individual animals that rise to the top.”

## Cody Sankey

**Beef Sire Procurement Manager, Genex, Shawano, Wis.**

“There are a lot of markets out there; a lot of diversity, and that means there are places where very different kinds of sires will fit,” says Cody Sankey. “Calving ease sells the most semen, but that’s not the only kind of bull people want. Some producers are looking for moderation, and others want even bigger cows. Preferences vary from balanced-trait bulls to those with an extreme spread (to their trait EPDs), to cow-makers, to high-genomic bulls.”

Sankey’s point is that bull studs

actively seek out different kinds of bulls to satisfy different markets. However, he cautions breeders who might view bull studs as a targeted market for their own breeding programs.

“Relatively few breeders raise bulls that become really successful AI sires, and only a handful of those breeders ever raise more than one or two high-echelon sires,” adds Sankey. “To make it a priority is like swinging for the fence on every pitch. You’re probably going to be disappointed.”

Rather, Sankey recommends that breeders focus on pedigree, phenotype and data (EPDs and genomics) to breed cattle that work for their particular market — their own commercial clientele.

“Stay true to yourself and breed the kind of cattle that make you and your customers profitable,” advises Sankey. “Breed for consistency. Stay with it. If a special individual crops up, we’ll find him.” **A**

*Editor’s Note: Troy Smith is a cattleman and freelance writer from Sargent, Neb.*



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