

Which semen should I buy?



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There have been numerous articles written by many knowledgeable people in the U.S. and other countries concerning bull selection. And although it's every bit as important as buying a bull, not so much information has been compiled on semen selection for an A.I. program. In fact, many people seem to forget that buying semen is no different from buying a bull.

So I think I will try to reflect here some of my thoughts as a commercial semen supplier and also some things I feel you as a purebred breeder need to consider when purchasing semen.

One of the first areas you need to be concerned with in the purchase of semen is health, and most of the semen processed in North America goes through laboratories that are highly capable and that also put out a very high quality product.

Certified Semen Services

You need, however, to purchase semen from individuals or organizations that process semen in laboratories approved by Certified Semen Services. Certified Semen

Services is an organization formed by the National Assn. of Animal Breeders that periodically checks labs for the kinds and types of procedures they are following to assure that the semen out of a particular vial or straw is of the highest quality from a health standpoint as well as from a reproductive standpoint. If the lab is a CSS lab, the CSS logo will be on the straw or ampule you will be using.

I think you should be interested; and before you purchase any semen, especially from a privately owned bull, you need to check health tests the bull has had.

The next question is "Which bull do I buy or which group of bulls do I buy to help me in my A.I. program?" Considering the semen now being purchased, I am certain many of you use varying criteria in sire selection. Many of you are going to buy semen from the hottest bull in the country from the standpoint of popularity, then use him indiscriminately throughout your herd so you can capitalize on the aspect of selling the first offspring of that popular bull.

This is not all wrong. It is, in fact, a very excellent merchandising program, and I believe it has paid some people quite handsomely. But it is not a breeding program.

Like Selecting a Bull

When you are thinking about an A.I. program, you need to be thinking about which bulls you can purchase semen from that are going to add to the genetic merit of your cattle. It is no different than making herd sire selections. You need to analyze your herd and you need to figure out which traits you need to emphasize the most. You probably have different cows that are going to need different kinds and types of bulls, and one of the great advantages of A.I. breeding is that you can have a tremendous number of different kinds and types of bulls to choose from. You do not have to breed one particular bull to all of your cows.

I see people getting concerned. They say, "Well, I am using too many bulls," because they might be using five or six or seven different A.I. bulls. But if you study top Holstein breeders in the U.S., many of them are

using 20-25 different bulls on 100 head of cows, so I think you have a long ways to go before worrying about using too many bulls in your program.

Inventory Your Herd

I think you need to inventory your cow herd and decide which cows need which particular traits. If you have a group of cows that need frame and milk, then select a bull that is going to give you frame and milk. If you have cows that need thickness and growth, then select a bull that is going to give their calves thickness and growth. If you have a set of yearling heifers, then you need to be concerned about what bull you can put into that set of heifers to minimize calving difficulty but also give you some excellent cattle from a genetic standpoint.

Certainly, if you are going to be breeding A.I., these are some of the things you can do. Now, how are you going to make your selections? Is it going to be word of mouth—the thing a lot of semen selection is based on today?

As I travel across the country, I hear one story about a bull here, another story about a bull there. Well, the Angus breeder today has more information than that at his disposal. He has some things at his fingertips he's never had before—the AHIR Field Data Report and the Angus Sire Evaluation Program.

Field Data Report

The new AHIR Field Data Report compares 564 bulls on growth traits—birth weight, weaning weight and yearling weight—and also gives a maternal breeding value on each bull. Now, if you are interested in increasing growth rate and

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maternal traits in your cattle, that's certainly the greatest guide you have had in Angus breeding. There are bulls in the report that are extremely high in both growth and maternal traits, and if you select these bulls and stack them together in your cow herd, you are going to make tremendous progress.

When we consider that out of 564 bulls there are eight that rate +50 lb. on yearling weight, these eight are really super bulls so far as growth is concerned. These bulls (they represent a little more than 1% of the population of all bulls sampled) are not only truly superior in their growth, many of them are also superior in daughter production. Bulls of this type are going to set a solid foundation for your herd. They have predictability, and that is what we are trying

to develop in beef cattle breeding. Using these bulls will increase the frequency of desired traits within your herd or in the population of cattle you are currently working with.

Angus Sire Evaluation

Also an excellent source of information is the Angus Sire Evaluation Report published in the ANGUS JOURNAL each January. There have been more than 300 bulls evaluated on this program, and I would dare say these bulls are the cream of the crop so far as the young growth bulls within the breed are concerned. You will notice that many of the bulls that rank high in the Field Data Report as a rule appear high in the structured Angus Sire Evaluation Report, so if you want to select for growth, using these two data sources is extremely important.

When buying semen, you should be concerned about getting all of the available data on a particular bull. Most A.I. studs today are putting out sire directories with complete data, including not only the sire evaluation data but also any available estimated breeding values. However, if a bull does not have data either in the Angus Sire Evaluation Report or from the Field Data Report or from the A.I. stud, \$3 will buy a particular bull's performance pedigree from the American Angus Assn. And that's a very good investment. The performance pedigree will tell you what a bull's estimated breeding values are for growth, weaning and yearling.

Importance of EBV

Many of you would be amazed if you would read the estimated breeding values of some of the bulls you have purchased semen from in the past year or so, thinking you were going to increase maternal traits in your herd. That particular bull might have from a 95-98 maternal breeding value—which means the chances of him increasing milk production in any herd of cattle is extremely low. If you need to increase milk production in your cows, you should be searching out bulls that have high estimated breeding values for maternal traits.

I don't think there is any question that very few people today are utilizing all available data from the Angus association to make decisions on semen purchases. Show ring placing is probably one of the criteria used most in semen selection; the other criteria seems to be height. Certainly one of the reasons the A.I. industry and other people have tried to gather some of the tallest bulls in the breed is that many Angus breeders demand height and are willing to pay for it. You will buy semen from a tall bull because you think you can produce tall cattle by him even if his breeding values are all below average. You have basically forgotten you need to produce cattle that are going to be functionally efficient—ones that will calve, grow, milk.

Do Need to Increase Frame

Yes, I also want to have the tallest cattle I

can possible have, because I feel we need to change and increase frame size as a whole within the Angus breed and because we need to have flexibility in marketing and because I definitely feel many Angus cattle are too small. However, to increase size, I don't think any Angus breeder needs to give up many of the traits that have made Angus cattle great today.

One of those is maternal traits. If you lose maternal traits in Angus cattle, I would say that you would have real tough sledding selling to one of your better customers, the commercial beef cattle industry. There maternal traits are one of your greatest attributes, I think, and right now you have a real lead on your major competitor. And I think as a breed you need to covet this and use bulls well above average in maternal breeding values to develop cattle superior in milk production.

Another area for us to look at in semen selection is the use of a proven sire versus the use of a young bull. Almost every purebred breeder decides he has to use the hot

two or three young bulls in the country; he does not use the good proven genetics from older bulls available at a very reasonable figure that actually can do more good in a herd than young bulls can.

Anticipation Is 90%

Yes, the young bulls are exciting. And one of the reasons is that anticipation is 90% of the purebred cattle business. We always can anticipate what calves by a particular bull will be like. But after those calves are here, they usually never reach expectations; some of the glamour and luster are lost.

Yes, I am for turning generations, but I realize when we develop bulls such as those that can potentially put an extra 50 lb. on yearling weights and have a plus in maternal traits, we are going to have to sample a tremendous number of those bulls' sons to find ones superior to them. As measured by the Field Data Report, there are currently eight of those bulls in the country. That means for improvement in their offspring, those eight are going to have to be mated

to cows of equal value. It follows that there probably aren't more than 100 cows in the country equal those eight in genetic value. To get those cows mated with the right bulls becomes the most important thing. And unless we get those kind of bulls and cows mated together, we will not get better young bulls.

If You Use Young Bulls

My recommendation to most people is this: If you want to sample young bulls, I recommend using all proven bulls in your A.I. program and using young bulls in your natural service program. Or if you want to utilize some young bulls through A.I., use 60-75% of the semen from proven bulls and the balance from young bulls. And never use just one young bull; use two, three, four or five to hedge your bets.

Each year Select Sires purchases a group of young bulls. It is always quite interesting to me when people ask me which young bull I would use or which one is the best one. My stock answer—always—is that if I knew which was the best, I wouldn't have bought the others. Most young bulls we bring in are very similar when analyzed from a breeding value standpoint; then these young bulls are progeny tested and we sort them out.

Now when we look at the population of the young bulls in the U.S. from which semen is being offered, we realize that many of them, for one reason or another, are going to be more popular because of show records or because of their performance at a particular test station or because of their sire or dam. But don't get infatuated with any young bull and breed all of your cows to him. If you want to gamble this way you'd probably better go to Las Vegas or Reno, because your odds there are going to be much better.

Use Several

If you want to use young bulls, use at least several and use ones that have high estimated breeding values for growth and maternal traits and also have some of the other traits you are interested in.

I would take the following steps if I was trying to decide what semen to bring into my program. I first would scan the sire summary and decide which bulls to use in my herd from the growth and maternal standpoints, trying to maximize growth and maximize maternal traits. There are bulls I would not be able to use in some areas because of birth weight, etc., and I would make note of them. I would then make a list of the bulls from the sire summary I wanted to use. Then I either would try to analyze cattle by those bulls or I would talk with people who could give me some sound advice on some of their progeny's other traits, traits not included in the sire summary. These other traits—which I think are important today to cattle breeders—would be skeletal soundness, muscle structure, frame size, fleshing ability, disposition, testical size on sons, udder and teat soundness on daughters, amount of white and presence

of the red gene. I think if you take these things into consideration and make your decision based on the cattle within your herd, the bulls from the sire summary are going to work best.

Another Consideration

Keep in mind that, if you have a bull that sires adequate frame and round muscle, you would not want to use him on a round-muscle set of cows. Rather, you probably would want to use him on cows that need

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more expression of muscling. However, these bulls could be very similar in growth pattern and look very similar on the sire summary. So you probably had better ask yourself those questions, too, then answer them either on your own or by relying on people in whom you have confidence. Then I think you have gone a long way toward making the proper selection of semen to purchase.

Some other thoughts I have could be biases; however, I think they cover some areas people need to be concerned about.

One of the most important is that people need to forget the perfect bull syndrome. Many of you refuse to use A.I. bulls or any other bull because you feel you have the perfect bull at home. Or when you do decide on an A.I. bull, you decide that he is perfect for all cases. There has never been and never will be the perfect bull. Every bull has his strengths and every bull has his weaknesses. You breed cattle by pieces and you put them together by pieces. Putting the strongest pieces of the bull under the weakest pieces of the cow is the way you are going to change the cattle population. So the quicker you get away from the perfect bull syndrome, the better cattle breeder you are going to be.

Price and Quality

I think one of the other areas you need to consider is this. Just because semen is high-priced does not mean it is from the best bull. Many bulls are available at very reasonable figures that are really some of the genetically superior bulls on today's market. Some bulls are high-priced because (1) they don't produce a lot of semen, (2) because owners want to restrict the number of offspring by a particular bull or (3) because owners want them bred to all good cows.


You need to analyze data on a bull—both progeny and performance information

—and you need to analyze the physical traits of that bull. Then you need to make your own decisions. You have to be the judge of this, not a sale manager, not a semen salesman, not the bull's owner. You as an individual herd owner must decide which semen you are going to put into your cows, because that is the most important

decision you probably are going to make in your cow herd in the next few years.

When you consider that in your lifetime—if you start at age 20—the best you can probably do is turn eight generations in your herd, you cannot afford to throw away even one of those generations. You need to make the right decisions. Those decisions

need to be based on economically important facts, and those facts need to be substantiated by good, sound, reliable performance and progeny information on the different traits you are selecting for.

If you make these kinds of decisions in your semen selection program, they definitely will show up in your cow herd. This is the way new genetics are put into your herd. And those decisions can earn you an excellent return on the amount invested. 

Virginia BCIA Reports Results On Senior Bulls at Red House

According to Virginia BCIA's Red House senior bull test 140-day report, a bull consigned by James Smith, Butner, N.C., topped the Angus division with a 117 over-all index. A PS Franco 064 157 son, he had an average daily gain ratio of 115.

Walnut Hill Farm, Rockville, owned the second high indexing bull, a Biffles Emulous 007 son whose gain ratio was 129, over-all ratio 116.

Another Smith bull by PS Franco 064 157 indexed 112, with a 111 average daily gain ratio. Also indexing 112 was a Glenowen Favour 4 son consigned by Owen Thomas & Sons, Round Hill. His gain ratio was 116. Paul Saunders, Piney River, had an Oaks Ideal 123 son with a gain ratio of 114 whose 111 index ranked him fifth among the Angus bulls. 