A Rancher's Search For the Perfect Bull

I am enlisting as many people as possible in my search for the "perfect bull" for several reasons. The first reason is to obtain help with a large undertaking. Another objective is to stimulate thought, discussion, education and action for myself and for the entire industry. As individual cattle producers, and as an industry, we need to correctly define our goals and then make rapid and significant progress toward those goals.

Asking for help has forced me to define what I am looking for as clearly as possible. I anticipate several questions and possible objections as others think about the standards that I have chosen.

I am seeking very moderate sized cattle for several reasons. First, I think they are more adapted to my environment. Second, I also think it will be possible to meet the carcass needs of our most important consumers with moderate sized cattle. This might be especially true once our industry starts making significant progress in the carcass characteristics of our cattle. Finally, I question the economics of maintaining a larger factory (cow) than is needed to accomplish our carcass objectives.

I also think our industry has ignored, or damaged, good hormone function and fertility in our cattle. Large and influential segments of our industry seem to have formed an idealized version of cows and bulls that both look very much like steers — hormoneless and infertile. Generally the problem can be overcome with careful management and a busy feed wagon, but again I question the economic impact of that choice.

Individually and collectively we have been receiving some regular and severe discipline out behind the chicken coop. Unless we make a series of corrections, that discipline has every indication of turning into permanently damaging abuse. Again, I ask for your help.

All of us would benefit if the various segments of our industry would gather together to coordinate some carefully chosen industry targets and goals. These goals need to consider everyone from the consumer to the producer. We can't afford to make mistakes and we no longer have the luxury of devoting huge resources to unproductive fads.

For years I have been searching for what I think would be a perfect bull. He needs to be adapted to the extremes of the northern Great Plains where wind chills can be lower than 90 below in the winter and temperatures sometimes exceed 105 degrees in the summer.

He should be able to meet his nutritional needs to the maximum extent possible by grazing native range year around. This adaptability will be evidenced by an early, long and thick winter coat of hair that sheds in early spring revealing a sleek hair coat. He should come from a line of functional, productive cattle.

He should have acceptable conformation, structure and soundness, and be thick and easy keeping. These traits will help him and his offspring achieve superior fertility and longevity.

He should have a quiet, manageable disposition and be free from genetic defects. I prefer polled, black cattle, with dark pigment around the eyes and scrotal area required.

The moderate birth weight of his calves should be about '75 pounds for heifers and about 85 pounds for bulls, and these calves should be vigorous and hardy at birth. His offspring should grow rapidly and efficiently to a moderate mature size. I like to see above average and proven weaning and yearling EPDs.

In order to maintain moderate mature size, I seek to keep frame scores under 6, mature hip height 57 inches or under, and mature weight as close to one ton or below as possible.

His hormones should be expressed with thick skin and coarse hair. His head and neck should be masculine and covered by darker hue, coarse hair that may be straight but preferably is curly.

He should have a prominent bulging neck muscle, thick flat shoulders and a heavy thick tail. His profile should demonstrate a well-developed front quarter. His pendulous scrotum should be covered with short, sparse hair and he should have large, sound, balanced testicle development with good semen production.

Steers he produces should gain rapidly and efficiently. They should finish in the low 1,100s with a dressing percentage of about 65 percent and a carcass weight in the low 700s. They should yield grade below 2 with about a quarter inch of backfat. They need to grade high Choice with a ribeye of approximately 14 square inches.

His female progeny should have acceptable pelvic structure and above average milk with functional teats and udders. They should have good mothering instincts as evidenced by licking the newborn calf and knowing their calf's location.

They should be easy keeping, functional and fertile. Their hormone expression should include feminine skin, hair, muscle and skeleton features. Their skin should be thinner and softer with finer hair. They should be fine muscled and look broody, with sleek, light forequarters, and capacity and depth in the hindquarters.

— Darrel Smith
Mobridge, S. D.

High Roughage Rations Have Place in Industry

I would like to respond to Bob Long's "Beef Logic" column titled "High Roughage vs High Concentrate Test Diets" in the January 1996 issue.

Bob Long stated, "Since almost all cattle produced in the United States go through a feed yard before slaughter it becomes obvious that bull gain tests should duplicate feedlot conditions.' Further, he implies there is no need for high roughage test diets.

For some unexplained reason he totally ignores the primary function of the North American cow herd, which is the conversion of roughage for the purpose of producing a calf crop. I am not aware of many cow herds that spend their producing years in the feedlot/ The majority spend at least 170 days grazing on pasture and the rest of the year being fed a high roughage ration.

Furthermore, their adaptability to convert this roughage in an efficient manner is of great financial importance. Harlan Hughes, in his article 'The Economic Beality of your Beef Cow Herd," November 1995, reported data collected from 145 beef cow herds across Nebraska in the 1994 Farm Business Management year-end summary. Total feed costs averaged $206 per cow. This included average pasture costs of $60 and winter feed costs of $148. 'Ibtal costs per cow, which included all other non-feed costs, averaged $324 per cow. Sixty-four percent of the total cost per cow was feed.

In the Cattle-Fax survey, "Keeping Costs Down: Top Five Ways (1994)," it was stated that 40 percent of respondents indicated reducing supplemental feed costs as their primary cost-cutting measure. Thirty percent indicated practicing rotational grazing or better pasture management. Twenty-seven percent indicated using the right genetics. Twenty-five percent indicated reducing labor costs. Nineteen percent indicated the maintenance of

strong herd health.

The complete lack of reference to feedlot performance in these studies of beef cow herd profitability would seem to indicate it has become overrated as a sire selection priority, especially from the standpoint of raising replacement females. The above data indicates the more efficient a cow herd is on pasture and at home on feed, the greater the potential for reducing input costs and increasing profitability. Based on this financial reality, it would seem important to select for genetics that will perform well under high roughage conditions.

Bob Long's article quotes Jay Lush, the father of animal breeding as saying, "Breeding stock should be selected under the same conditions as those under which their progeny are expected to perform." And since replacements are expected to perform under high roughage conditions then logically their sires should be tested under these conditions as well.

Contrary to Bob Long's statement that, "all cattle do well on roughage," any rancher will tell you all individuals are not equal in this trait. In our experience cattle that do well on roughage also do well in the feedlot. We have not found the reverse to be equally true. In other words, not all cattle who do well in the feedlot on concentrates do as well on grass. In fact, I would say this has been one of the main stumbling blocks for the selection of efficient maternal genetics.

A common experience of many ranchers is the purchase of bulls that have performed well on concentrate that subsequently prove themselves to be very poor keepers on pasture and on roughage rations. Many of them won't regain or maintain any condition unless they are supplemented with grain. Not only do they do poorly on low cost roughage rations, they also pass this trait to their offspring. The females, if kept as replacements, also become a liability to the cow-calf producer.

It seems to me there is a legitimate place for high roughage ration or pasture gain tests when selecting for maternal genetics that will perform efficiently on roughage and assist the rancher in reducing input costs.

— Dylan Biggs
Coronation, Alberta, Canada

Organic Beef Production Is Viable Niche Market

I read "Beef Logic" in the December *Angus Journal* entitled "Organic Beef Production Raises Concerns" and feel compelled to make a few comments.

By all measures we are small potatoes in the beef industry. We have 20 to 30 Angus cows and sell bulls, replacement heifers, feeders and fed cattle. We don't make a living on this activity but do have a positive cash flow. I am very serious about it — sort of a passion with me. I support the raising of beef because it potentially is a very efficient and sustainable way to produce food.

The overriding theme in your essay is that our customers should buy what the industry produces regardless of what they really want. With all due respect, you are out of tune with the times. In this day and age the name of the game is to give the customer what he wants.

Now there may be some differences between what the customer *wants* and what the customer *needs*. That is where education and dialog comes into the equation. But you don't educate or create dialog by telling the customer he is ignorant.

If there are people who want and think they need beef raised without adding growth hormones or small doses of antibiotics why don't we raise beef without these practices and charge more for it.

I've done it on a small scale and it works. From what I read in the *Angus Journal* and other publications, bigger producers have done it, too. In order to make it work on a broader scale we don't need industry spokesmen saying this practice "... raises concerns" but rather a system for assuring the consuming public that if it wants such a product it can get it.

On a much larger scale this logic should be used to give us access to the European Union (EU). The issue there is identical and the response of the beef industry is regrettably the same. Basically we are saying the consumer in the EU is ignorant and should buy what we say they should buy. What happened to "the customer is always right?" What happens if Australia, Argentina, Brazil, Mexico or Canada introduces a hormone-free certification program to satisfy the EU customer?

This is not the time for people in this industry to circle the wagons and arrogantly refuse to listen to even a small constituency of its customers. Your article tells the producer to do just that. We need every niche market we can get. We look to folks like yourself for leadership — not wagon circling instructions.

-Jim Munsch
Coon Valley, Wis.

WE WELCOME YOUR INPUT!

Our Beef Improvement section has been expanded to include more information for today's performance-minded breeder. Both "Beef Logic" by Bob Long and the "What's Your Beef? columns serve as a forum for Angus breeders and industry experts to express their opinions on current issues and topics of breed improvement and performance programs.

Send or fax your comments to:
Editor, Angus Journal
3201 Frederick Blvd.
St. Joseph, MO 64506
Fax (816) 233-6575