

Don't forget Mom!

by Ron Bolze, director of progeny tests for carcass merit

You need a new herd sire. You've done your homework. You've found the perfect bull. According to your well-thought-out selection plan, he has the perfect balance of expected progeny differences (EPDs) for birth weight, weaning weight, yearling weight, pure milk, combined maternal, direct and maternal calving ease, carcass characteristics, and additional production traits.

He has a stacked pedigree for these same traits, with a sire and maternal grandsire with similar EPDs. Their EPDs are accompanied by high accuracy values.

Your bull prospect has impeccable individual performance, with a ratio less than those of his contemporaries for birth weight and blasting his contemporaries out of the water for weaning and yearling weight.

He is the right frame score for your selection scheme — heavily muscled, structurally correct, and free- and easy-moving. He excels in pelvic area and scrotal circumference and passed his breeding soundness exam (BSE) with flying colors. To top it off, he possesses unsurpassed eye appeal. He's truly the sire of the next generation, capable of changing all the things that need to be corrected in your current cow herd.

You have truly done your homework. Right? Maybe.

The bottom side

Although this scenario presents far more thought and planning than most bull buyers have traditionally committed to the selection of their next herd sire, a potential oversight still exists. Don't forget Mom, particularly if the herd sire will be used to produce replacement females.

Many herd sires are purchased without regard to the bottom side of the pedigree. Sure, cow data are reflected in the herd sire's individual performance and EPDs, but a number of additional questions need to be answered for more complete analysis of your potential herd sire.

■ How about the cow lifetime productivity?

The number of years a cow remains functionally productive is also an issue. Cow longevity is of economic significance through the resulting reduction in female replacement rate.

Performance pedigrees include how many calves a cow has weaned at what average ratio. At the breeder's request, the American Angus Association can also generate a "Produce of Dam Summary" on any (or all) cows in a producer's herd. To request a summary, contact the Angus Herd Improvement Records (AHIR) Program at (816) 383-5100. To get the information on the dam of a bull you're considering as a herd sire, request the breeder to obtain and provide the summary for you.

■ How about regularity of calving?

Calving interval is one measure. Ideally, herd sires should come from cows calving early every year. Studying detailed artificial insemination (AI) records and getting a handle on services per conception may be another indication of fertility. Has she been forced to conceive during defined breeding seasons (reproductive pressure) with minimal supplementation? This is achieved most economically by calving later in the spring, closer to production of green grass.

■ How big is the cow?

Would she fit your operation and maintain her productivity with your management and feed resources? If she is big, is she "pounds big" or "inches big"? Does she have adequate rib, volume and muscle? Stocking rate is an often-overlooked issue. Commercial producers will usually produce more total pounds of calf from an increased number of smaller, deeper-ribbed, easier-fleshing cows, even though individual calf weaning weight may be reduced.

■ How about functional traits?

Does she have a functional, sound udder (evaluated at calving, not weeks or months later)? Is she sound on her feet and legs? Has she ever required a foot trimming? How about body condition or fleshing ability? Would she maintain her flesh without a change in your management or feed resources? How's her disposition? Herd sires should come from cows managed similar to yours.

■ If she's an older cow, does she have daughters in the herd?

If so, have they performed, calved regularly and been functional? Has she or does she have sons in service in other herds? If so, have they performed?

■ In short, is she the kind of cow that you would want your entire cow herd to be?

Indeed, the use of EPDs represents an excellent source of information for herd-sire selection. High-accuracy EPDs, as a selection tool, can do a masterful job of making directional change in herd output (such as growth and carcass characteristics). They really do not, however, account for the input side of the profit equation (cost of production).

Bulls with similar EPDs may have mothers that differ drastically in productivity and reproductive, structural and functional soundness when they are expected to perform under practical, intensively managed forage programs. After all, not all cows are created equal.

Do all your homework — and don't forget Mom!

