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# BUYING BULLS: Nothing Simple About It

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When I first looked at the title I was given for this program, it appeared to be real simple. "Bulls." However, after reviewing my criteria for purchasing bulls, I find that there is nothing simple about it.

As a profit-oriented commercial cattleman, I am very particular about the bulls I buy. To start with, I don't want the bulls that are rejects from purebred herds. In the past nine months, I have purchased nearly 100 bulls for our commercial operation. They have been purchased by private treaty, at state performance test stations, at private performance test stations and at purebred cattle sales. It always irritates me to hear an auctioneer or sales advisor say, "This bull is a good bull for a commercial herd." I say to heck with that.

I realize there are some Angus bulls that have some white on their bellies and some Polled Hereford bulls that have scurs or too much white on their backs and thus may be excluded from purebred herds. I am color blind. I love to look at a sales catalog for our state performance test station and see a Polled Hereford bull with a good performance record listed with scurs. I know there is a good chance that I will get a superior animal because the purebred people are not interested in him.

## Take Out Guess-Work

When buying bulls, the first thing I want to do is to take the guess-work out of it.

I made a trip last fall to the Garst Co. in Coon Rapids, Iowa. I am sure many of you

are familiar with Steve and Mary Garst's operation. In my opinion, it is one of the best. When I arrived in Coon Rapids, the Garsts were not in town, so I had the privilege of having Dr. Bob de Baca (who is the Garst geneticist) show me the bulls.

But before I looked at the bulls, I looked at their performance records. There was a group of over 100 bulls left after the culls had been removed based on weaning, yearling and feedlot performance. They also had been culled on frame size and soundness.

But the Garsts did not stop there—and I think this is very important. Their veterinary had examined the reproductive organs and ejaculated the bulls for a semen study that included concentration, motility and live-dead rates. The vet had evaluated the erection and protrusion of the bulls. Last but by no means least, scrotal circumference had been measured. This is very important, since scrotal size is related to total sperm production.

Since all the tests done on these bulls were completed just the day before I arrived, I had first pick on this group of bulls. When I left that afternoon, I knew the 16 bulls I had purchased were good ones. Their first calves will be on the ground this fall and I am looking forward to seeing them. However, I do not have to see them to know that they will be good ones. I bred these bulls with "predictable performance" to good cows, so I know I'll have good

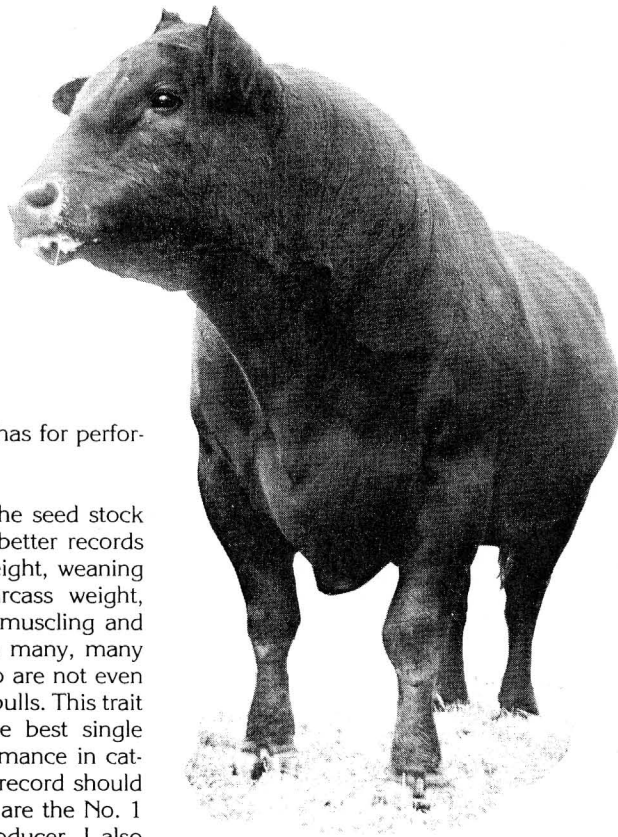
calves. Farming is a big gamble anyway, but by taking the guess-work out of buying bulls, we have improved the odds in our favor.

## Predictable Performance

I mentioned the words "predictable performance." I first heard these words from a Virginia Polled Hereford breeder named James Bennett. (Incidentally, he was the BIF recipient of the 1978 Seed Stock Producer of the Year Award). I asked James exactly what he meant by "predictable performance." The example he gave was this: Cow No. 207 is nine years old; her weaning and yearling performance ratios are 105 and 106 for seven calves; one of her daughters has had five calves with indexes of 110 and 111; one of her granddaughters has had three calves with indexes of 116 and 115. When James breeds these cows, he knows that he will have outstanding calves.

I suggest to you that we should not gamble with our cattle, because with "predictable performance," we don't need to.

I am a fanatic on performance testing and performance records. I was very fortunate to be exposed to people like C.K. Allen, Doc Bartenslager, James Bennett, Ike Eller and Dave Nichols when I started in the cattle business. Dave Nichols probably didn't know me from Adam until I got up here a few minutes ago, but several years ago he spoke to the Virginia BCIA annual meeting. I have never forgotten the en-



thusiasm and conviction he has for performance.

#### **Good Records**

One of the big needs of the seed stock man is to keep as good or better records than I do. We keep birth weight, weaning weight, yearling weight, carcass weight, ADG, frame, conformation, muscling and soundness scores. There are many, many purebred breeders today who are not even keeping yearling records on bulls. This trait is 60% heritable and is the best single measure of individual performance in cattle. It seems to me that this record should be kept on bulls, since they are the No. 1 product of a seed stock producer. I also would like to mention, as Ike Eller does, that all these records are worthless unless you use them.

There are a few commercial breeders who are raising and performance testing commercial bulls for sale. These people are going to be taking some of your customers if a better job of performance testing and record keeping isn't done. Some people will say, "Well, you can't get registration papers for these bulls." Papers are not important to many commercial breeders, because when bulls leave their operations, they go to slaughter.

A good friend of mine (who was recently elected to the BIF Board of Directors) wanted to allow commercial bulls that had been performance tested in a Virginia BCIA sponsored bull sale. The idea was not approved by the Sale Committee. However, I personally feel that it might have some merit in the very near future if some purebred producers continue to ignore performance testing.

#### **Cull Irregular Producers**

Another need you have as purebred breeders is to cull your cattle that don't breed and calve every 365 days. I recently attended a purebred sale where 12 of the first bred 34 cows sold would not calve within 365 days of their last calves. Some were going to be as long as 18 months between calves. I won't buy bulls whose mothers are problem breeders. You can have them, because I don't need them. We breed heifers for 42 days and cows for

60-65 days, and the open ones go to the packing plant.

The next few years look pretty bright for selling bulls. There is going to be a temptation to keep more bulls for sale. I would urge you not to lower your standards. I would urge you to keep your castrating blades sharp and in use. It may look good now, but it will all come out in the wash later. A dozen good bulls to a dozen customers will not make up for one bad bull to one dissatisfied customer.

As a profit-oriented commercial cattleman, I need to know as much about bulls as I can before I buy them. This *must* be accurate information, however.

#### **Credibility**

Breeder credibility is one of the most important things to consider in buying bulls. When I go to a purebred sale and see some of the things that go on, I certainly wonder if the records are correct on the bulls that are for sale.

We need to stop this business of "I'll come to your sale this week and buy (and I say 'buy' with some doubts) and you come to my sale next week and buy." We need to stop selling bulls whose sires have known genetic defects. We need to stop running up the bid when we get a "live one." I was at a sale this spring when a breeder I know well asked me to do him a favor. He said, "If you are not interested in a certain bull, I would like for you to buy him for me." I inquired why and he said, "I want to watch the owner to see if he runs the bid up on the

bull." At another purebred sale, I would have purchased at least two bulls whose sire had been known to sire calves with mule foot, but Doc Bartenslager advised me of this fact. The list just goes on and on.

However, this credibility business works both ways. Doc Bartenslager, for example, sends many trailer and tractor loads of performance tested bulls to Florida every year. I am sure many of these bulls have been purchased sight unseen because of the reputation Doc has built up over the years.

#### **Birth Weights**

I would like to touch on birth weights for just a moment. Large birth weights don't concern me so long as I know the birth weight of the bull. I think it is really important to record birth weights because so many breeders breed their heifers to only Angus bulls. We have several groups of older black cows that can handle 100-115-lb. calves without any trouble. With a recorded birth weight, I can determine which cows to use which bulls on and not have too many problems.

In summary, let me say that we are all in business to make money. That's fine if it's honest money, but set some guidelines. We as commercial breeders would like to see:

1. Credible breeders.
2. Accurate performance records so we can achieve "predictable performance." Record birth weights, 205-day and 365-day weights.
3. Keep your standards high. Cull poor breeding and poor performing cows. Cull poor and marginal bulls. Keep calving ease records.
4. Take scrotal measurements.
5. Check reproductive organs.
6. Let's have good sound bulls.
7. Follow a good breeding program.
8. Don't offer us second rate bulls.
9. For examples of how it should be done, look at the Nichols, Garst, Bartenslager and Bennet programs.

Any good architect will tell you that a house is only as good as its foundation. The purebred industry is the foundation for the whole beef industry. You as seed stock producers have a tremendous responsibility to keep a strong foundation for all of us. ♣