

Good from the Start

Learning to manage young bulls properly can pay dividends.

by Megan Silveira, associate editor

There are roughly 29.1 million cows in the United States. Randall Spare, Ashland Vet Center, estimates it takes nearly 1 million bulls to service those cows. Every single one of those animals and their handlers are vital to the success of not only the beef industry, but the continued health of the planet.

“We want to feed the world with the best beef possible, and that takes a collaboration of the best buyers and sellers in the industry,” Spare explains.

Each side of the equation comes with its own challenges. But Spare says seedstock producers have to be prepared to offer livestock for sale that can meet a variety of needs in a variety of ecosystems.

“As seedstock producers, we’re going to use the best animal husbandry to raise those cattle, to raise athletes that are going to go out and breed cows,” he adds.

Spare describes a “circle of commerce” that must be mastered by

providers of beef genetics. Registered breeders have to communicate with one another, describe to buyers why they should want to purchase their cattle, deliver genetics to customers and promote proper livestock management techniques.

In this veterinarian’s mind, you have to begin with the end in mind when it comes to managing young bulls. There is, however, no need to make the task difficult.

“Easy does it.”

It’s Spare’s simplest piece of advice, but it’s one he says can be applied to nearly every aspect of young bull management.

Feed, weight and general upkeep

In the past, Spare says the beef industry saw breeders pushing bulls with grain. In today’s world that’s not the case, nor is it necessary in Spare’s mind.

Demand now calls for young sires to be sold at about 1,200 pounds

when they’re around a year of age. Bulls, like stocker cattle, can be raised on a low forage diet to hit that threshold. Spare says the feed is highly digestible and they are capable of accomplishing the same goals from a nutritional standpoint.

Testing forages can help ensure the right amount of feed is being offered. Balanced rations are vital, and Spare lists zinc as an important trace mineral for spermatogenesis. Ionophores can help increase digestibility in ruminants and help decrease feed costs.

Keeping up with foot scoring is also an essential step to ensuring bulls are sound enough to thrive during upcoming breeding seasons. Ensuring cattle have locations to rest and lay down is vital to keeping their legs in good condition.

Test and exams

Spare describes bull fertility tests as fairly black and white. That originates with the test being a

Table 1: Scrotal Circumference

Age	SC (CM)
* < 15 Mo	30
> 15 < 18 Mo	31
> 18 < 21 Mo	32
> 21 < 24 Mo	33
> 24 Mo	34

Table 2: Sperm Motility

Mass Activity (gross)	Rating	Individual
Rapid Swirling	Very Good (VG)	> 70%
Slower Swirling	Good (G)	50-69%
Generalized Oscillation	Fair (F)	30-49%
Sporadic Oscillation	Poor (P)	< 30%



requires a bit more care and time. For Spare, the exam starts even before the animal is moved towards the chute. He likes to walk the pens prior to the breeding soundness exam, starting with a physical checkup as he looks at feet and legs on each individual bull.

Next, Spare says he palpates all bulls, feeling their seminal vesicles

and massaging the urethra. Prior to measuring the scrotum, Spare palpates the epididymis and feels tone of testicles.

When it's time for the electrical stimulation, Spare says his goal is to always avoid vocalization from the bull. The penis should be visually and physically examined. Problems like warts aren't unsolvable, but issues like corpus cavernosum (shaft infection) and persistent frenulum need to be identified.

Once an ejaculation sample has been collected, sperm cells can be viewed. Spare reminds producers cells examined were produced 60 days prior to collection, so events like bad weather can affect quality.

If the testicles feel satisfactory to Spare, he says he will dedicate as much time and effort to collecting a sample as necessary. He admits he's even encouraged producers to bring back bulls another time to try to collect a sample. High-stress environments can complicate things for both the bull and the veterinarian. But in Spare's opinion, retesting can be worth it, if it

reassures a producer that their next sire is ready for the breeding season.

Caring for clients

Seedstock producers have a unique opportunity, as Spare says they have the most opportunity to help their cattle succeed. Not only can they provide proper care prior to a sale date, but they also are able to communicate with their buyers to ensure that care continues.


"We need to come back to care and compassion and how we take care of these animals," he explains.

Disease pressures like BVD (bovine viral diarrhea), parasites, anaplasmosis and leptospirosis all make the list of concerns and conversation with commercial buyers.

Spare's biggest concern, however, comes with the age of bulls. While young sires are the demand of the industry, Spare says cattlemen shouldn't place the expectations of older bulls on these adolescent cattle.

Producers give a little extra care and forgiveness to first-calf heifers, so why shouldn't young bulls be given the same consideration? These bulls need time to acclimate to their environments and have different nutritional needs.

It falls on the shoulders of seedstock breeders to help emphasize that type of care to their customers, Spare says. It's all part of the circle of commerce — communication and care are at the core of this industry.

With those two tools on the side of producers, Spare believes that both bull sellers and buyers can achieve the overall mission of improving the genetic pool and producing the best beef possible. 

Editor's note: Randall Spare spoke as part of the Angus University education series during the 2023 Cattlemen's Congress.

pass or fail, but Spare encourages producers to remember there's no grading scale — bulls are either labeled as fertile or not.

"It's a frustrating time for some, and glorious for others," he explains.

The fertility test covers three areas: scrotal circumference, motility and sperm morphology.

Bulls have to meet a minimum measurement in scrotal circumference (see Table 1), have fair motility (see Table 2) and 70% normal cells for morphology.

Though Spare sees the importance of a fertility test, he encourages seedstock producers to ask themselves a broader question: would I turn this bull out in my cow herd and expect him to be OK?

Breeding soundness exams (sometimes called BSEs), when done correctly and thoroughly, can paint a full picture of a bull's potential in the pasture.

"It's a story," Spare explains of the exam. "It's not just run them in a chute, throw the probe in them, get an ejaculation and look at it."

Making sure the entire story is told