

OUTSIDE THE BOX

by Tom Field, University of Nebraska–Lincoln

Superstars and Depth Charts

Every January our family made the journey over the Rockies to spend a week at the National Western Stock Show.

As I grew into my high school years, the National Western Stock Show (NWSS) became the pinnacle experience for a seedstock enthusiast in search of the next great sire.

The conversations and dealmaking that filled the air of the barns and coliseum on the Hill were enchanting. The environment of possibility in those days was akin to draft day in the NFL, all interested parties in search of the next superstar sire.

Interestingly at the bottom of the Hill, across the railroad tracks, and in the shadows of the Livestock Exchange Building, a different effort was underway. Most commercial producers making their way down alleys and from pen to pen were in pursuit of the creation of a strong team — a bull battery that measured success not by one great individual, but rather by the strength of the depth chart.

For generations, selection depended on visual appraisal, pedigree assessment and breeder reputation. Eventually, genetic selection tools made a deeper level of analysis possible. While each tool available, then and now, had its role, the process of preparing to make decisions as to which sires to introduce to the herd has equal, if not greater, importance. The process yields favorable results when sufficient time and effort is

invested well before the moment of decision-making.

The most effective breeders begin with a question — “What am I attempting to accomplish?”

Relative to those goals, direction must be set for economically relevant traits. In some cases it will be to create higher performance, in other cases it will be to reduce outcomes (e.g., less milk production, less mature size, less calving difficulty, less aggressive behavior). In some situations the goal may be to hold steady at the current level of productivity.

As the breeding objectives come into focus, setting specific limits and nonnegotiables comes into play. It is in this phase breeders must be aware of the bottleneck that occurs wherein the establishment of high standards may not align with economic reality.

We might want a superstar herd bull, but we may lack the finances to make it so. Alternatives are made possible via reproductive techniques such as artificial insemination or embryo transfer. However, these approaches require heightened management and logistics, so these factors must be considered.

There is also the question of how to increase the odds of success. Thus, acceptable levels of accuracy associated with genetic predictions should be established. This is of particular importance when a single

sire is going to have the dominant influence on the next calf crop. For breeders who are building a stable of sires and who rely on natural service, the best approach to stacking the deck is to make sure the key expected progeny differences (EPDs) in groups of bulls fall within a relatively narrow range. Selecting the source of genetics is also important. The integrity, service orientation and genetic strategies of the breeders from whom bulls are purchased is of paramount importance. A knowledgeable and trusted supplier is invaluable.

Acquiring the right bulls requires discipline both in the establishment of the standards, but also in the active search to find sires that can deliver on the selection goals. Financial prudence must also be practiced to successfully merge the genetic and business goals of the enterprise. In the auction setting, it is easy for competitiveness and emotion to take hold; patience and having a plan B and C are important to success.

Whether the goal is to find the next great one or a stable of consistent performers, sire selection accomplished via an intentional and thorough process creates a sound foundation to build success. **AJ**

Editor's note: Tom Field is a rancher from Parlin, Colo., and the director of the Engler Agribusiness Entrepreneurship Program at the University of Nebraska–Lincoln.