VETERINARY CALL

by Bob Larson, Kansas State University

Bull Lameness

Help your bulls thrive each breeding season.

A successful breeding season requires bulls be able to detect estrus and effectively mate cows. Even mild lameness in a herd bull can result in a significant number of cows that fail to become pregnant.

Lameness is one of the most common reasons a previously fertile bull loses the ability to successfully mate cows. Carefully observing bull movement is a critical component of frequent herd assessments during the breeding season.

Most lameness issues are due to problems in the hoof or lower leg. One of the most common problems of cattle feet is an infection of the tissue above the hoof known as foot rot. The bacteria that causes foot rot is commonly present in soil, but needs an injury to break the skin to allow infection to invade the foot.

If identified early, most bulls will respond to treatment with antibiotics with complete recovery. If the infection has had longer to invade nearby joints, recovery is less likely. It is important to differentiate foot rot from cases where the hoof is damaged by trauma or from sole abscesses.

Trauma can be inflicted by a number of causes: nail penetration, cuts from glass or metal, or by damage from rocks or rough ground. Hooves can also be damaged by diseases such as laminitis, white line disease, sole abscesses, and hoof wall injuries that occur when bulls that were placed on a high-grain diet after weaning develop obvious or subclinical acidosis.

Injuries of the upper limb (particularly the shoulder and stifle) are probably the second most common cause of lameness in breeding bulls, after problems with the hoof. Shoulder injuries can occur during dismount of cows or other bulls, or due to slipping on slick surfaces. Most stifle injuries are due to bull fights that result in damaged cruciate ligaments or other soft tissue structures in the stifle.

Although some hoof or leg problems can resolve over time with rest alone, many diseases or injuries require veterinary diagnosis and treatment. Examination of a lame bull requires a squeeze chute that allows close examination of the hooves and legs (preferably a hydraulic squeeze chute or tilt table).

Once safely restrained, the feet and lower legs should be cleaned. Any long or misshapen hooves should be trimmed to allow close inspection. Infections or injuries of the foot and lower leg might be treated by thorough cleaning, hoof trimming, removal of damaged or diseased hoof and sole with a specially designed knife, systemic or topical antibiotic treatment, bandaging, or placement of a block on the healthy toe to remove weight from affected toes.

Treatment of stifle injury involves intensive therapy of the joint followed by up to 60 days of confinement alone in a stall — followed by limited activity in a small paddock or pasture. After treatment, the bull will need to be housed in a clean environment where he doesn't have to walk very far or risk being injured by other cattle until he is completely healed.

A bull that becomes lame during the breeding season is unlikely to be a successful breeder for the remainder of the season. He should be isolated from other cattle, examined by a veterinarian, and if possible, treated so he can return as a herd bull at a later time. AJ

Editor's note: Robert L. Larson is a professor of production medicine and executive director of Veterinary Medicine Continuing Education at Kansas State University.