

On the Right Foot



Indiana bull test emphasizes performance and structural soundness.

Story & photos by Kasey Brown, senior associate editor

A young couple was building their herd and their family. They were expecting their first child in April, and also had a few bulls consigned to the Indiana Beef Evaluation Program (IBEP) Bull Test Station that had qualified for the spring sale. One of their bulls was the high-indexing bull, so the husband was at the bull sale at the Lynnwood-Purdue Agricultural Center in Carmel, Ind., to answer questions and help get the bull sold.

Little did he know that his wife would go into labor on the day of the sale. In 1983, there were no cell phones to tell him. Luckily, my older sister waited long enough to enter this world for Dad to get to the hospital once he found out what was happening.

While the IBEP Bull Test has a special place in my family's history, it has a rich history of its own. The test began in 1979, but the farm on which it now resides in Bedford, Ind., dates back to the 1830s. It was an extensive farm in Lawrence County owned by Moses Fell. One of his descendants, Moses Fell Dunn, donated 360 acres to Purdue University in 1914, making it the first and

oldest property outside of the university's home county designated for experiment work. The land was donated the same year Congress passed the Smith-Lever Act, which established the Cooperative Extension Service.

The lower third of Indiana's terrain is different than the rest of the state, being much rockier and hillier. While crops like corn, soybeans and hay still grow well, the terrain lends itself to grazing, limestone quarries and even fruit production. The farm had about 6,000 fruit trees and vines, consisting of grapes, apples, cherries, peaches and pears. Through the years, the focus of the research station has shifted to more traditional enterprises — cattle and row-crop production, including the state's bull test.

Test for the best

Brad Shelton, superintendent of the Ag Center and bull test manager, says southern Indiana leads the state in cattle numbers, and it makes sense to test bulls in a working environment. Since starting in 1979, the bull test moved from Tipton to Carmel and finally

settled in Bedford. It has tested more than 10,000 bulls in its 37-year existence.

The station hosts two 125-day tests a year, says Shelton. The winter test is designed for bulls born Jan. 1 through April 30 of that year, and bulls are delivered in late October to early November. The test ends in March, and the sale is hosted in April. The smaller summer test is for bulls born May 1 to Oct. 31 of the previous year. The test runs from late April or early May to September, with the sale in October.

Both tests have a three-week warm-up period because, Shelton explains, many of the bulls haven't seen silage before or have had varying amounts of concentrate before arriving at the test.

He notes, "We mimic a feedlot ration but with less energy. We don't want to finish the bulls, but we do want to see who rises to the top by expressing their genetic differences."

Silage always accounts for more than half of the ration. Normally, the bulls receive corn silage or wheatlage, corn grain, dried distillers' grains with solubles (DDGS) and balancer.

► **Above:** Brad Shelton notes, "We mimic a feedlot ration but with less energy. We don't want to finish the bulls, but we do want to see who rises to the top by expressing their genetic differences."

The test collects a variety of data, including average daily gain (ADG); weight per day of age (WDA); scrotal circumference; hip height to calculate a Beef Improvement Federation (BIF) frame score; ultrasound scan data, including ribeye area, rib fat and percent intramuscular fat; and a breeding soundness examination.

Shelton enjoys seeing more comprehensive tools being used by breeders, including expected progeny differences (EPDs) and genomic information. However, he's quick to emphasize the importance of phenotypic traits. The test places a high emphasis on feet and legs and on docility. Structural soundness has been a large priority for the test recently, and the test staff doesn't want to sell a bull with poor feet and legs.

"Structure has been a bigger issue recently, and we will kick out a bull for feet and leg issues. We have a committee that looks at the feet and legs very carefully so it's consistent and a bit less subjective," he explains. "Some commercial producers who see it in their herds have very little tolerance and will just stop going back to their seedstock provider if they encounter feet problems."

The test also emphasizes health, requiring entered bulls to have met Vac 45 or Vac 60 protocols with modified-live vaccines. They also administer booster vaccines during the test and notch for bovine viral diarrhoea (BVD) upon arrival.

"It is cheaper to give \$5 to prevent sickness than spend \$30 or more to fix it. Sickness can affect marbling, and we've seen that on the ultrasound scan," Shelton says.

Benefits of testing

There are bull tests across the country, and



► Shelton has been the bull test manager for about four years and has been in Extension since 2004.

Shelton believes in the benefits they provide cattlemen.

"They provide an unbiased source of data collection to prove bulls. Breeders can collect data at home, but this gives that data credibility. It's Extension personnel collecting the numbers. We don't have a 'horse in the race,' so producers can see how their bulls are performing objectively, how their vaccination protocols are holding up and see their genetic progress," he asserts.

Bull tests are great resources for smaller breeders, he adds, because the tests help them develop an unbiased reputation on the performance of their bulls and get their names out there. Only the top bulls in each test group qualify to be in the sale, and those bulls are given an IBEP freeze brand. The

breeders get their names out to sale attendees, but buyers know they are backed by IBEP.

Andrew Stewart of Stewart Select Angus, Greensburg, Ind., has tested bulls with IBEP since the early 1990s. He's gained many repeat customers by consigning his bulls to the test and the herd's reputation has increased by good performance at the test. A benefit for smaller breeders is the amount of sale exposure far outweighs the cost of the sale and test, he says.

Stewart says working with the test staff is easy, and he appreciates how much and how quickly he gets information back on his bulls. On the scheduled weigh days, he says, he generally gets a report on the bulls that evening.

He consigns bulls to find out which sire groups are performing better than others, and this information also plays into his breeding decisions regarding female families.

Kevin Beckington, KB Angus, Merritt, Mich., says the test has helped the relatively new operation make genetic progress faster with its objective data, and he enjoys seeing how his bulls compare to other breeders. Starting in 2006, KB Angus has benefited from the marketing advantages the bull test provides.

Beckington agrees that Shelton is accessible when he calls with questions on his bulls' development. He appreciates the emphasis on feet and legs at the Indiana test. He commends the facilities and says his bulls are taken care of well when they are on test. The sale is well-organized and well-attended, too. While it is an eight-hour drive for him to consign bulls, it has been worth the effort in the customer recognition he's gained and the data he's been able to take back to the operation.



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