



# Outside the Box

► by **Tom Field**, director of producer education, National Cattlemen's Beef Association

## Drafting the right players

*At the end of April, the teams of the National Football League (NFL) will engage in the process of selecting athletes to join their programs. In preparation for the draft, teams will spend a significant amount of time assessing their current players' performance, determining gaps between their status quo and desired outcomes, and determining the potential of the players in the draft to help them narrow the performance gap.*

### Similarities to bull selection

In this process, a considerable amount of data is collected and analyzed. In addition, they determine their budgetary limitations as they go through the process of determining the cost-benefit outcomes of the alternatives available to them. On draft day, coaches and personnel experts make their choices, all the while adjusting their plan based on the selection of other teams. All in all, there are a lot of comparisons to acquiring the best genetics for a cow herd.

The long-term impact of bulls on commercial cow herds is well-documented. Herd sires produce multiple offspring per year over the course of their productive lives in the herd. If replacement females are retained, their daughters then provide lasting influence beyond any single calf crop.

While larger herds can spread the risk of choosing the wrong bull by purchasing multiple sires each year, the small- and mid-sized herd that depends on natural-service mating systems absorbs more risk in that they introduce a limited number of bulls into their herds. Because of the significant impact on both short- and long-term productivity, making the right sire selection is a critical decision for the commercial cattle producer.

Developing a thoughtful process to sire selection sets the stage for an orderly and disciplined approach that enhances the ability of a buyer to make better bull-buying decisions. The first step is to define the "deal breakers" and "must haves." These criteria will vary from herd to herd, but the following examples provide one possible approach.

### Must haves: Supplier

► Seedstock suppliers must be trusted sources who are accountable to their customers and who provide excellent levels of support and service.

► Suppliers must be committed to genetic evaluation, data collection and participation in their national breed evaluation program.

They must be committed to a stringent culling system that discriminates against poor reproductive performance, poor structure and genetic estimates outside of defined criteria.

► Cow herd nutritional management should mirror that of a well-managed commercial herd.

In essence, this approach recognizes that before a commercial producer ever selects a bull, he or she must choose a seedstock supplier(s) by doing the hard work of determining and articulating needs and goals, doing detailed homework to identify acceptable seedstock suppliers, and to then enter into the

extended conversations that help finalize the final selection of the most appropriate genetic supplier. An ongoing conversation between seedstock supplier and commercial customer is the foundation upon which all progress in the beef industry is based.

Once a supplier is chosen, individual enterprises can best close the gap between their herd's current level and desired level of performance by selecting the correct sires. In general, the following provides a basis for selecting bulls that will fit the needs of an individual herd.

### Must haves: Bulls

► Sire candidates must have passed a breeding soundness exam (sometimes referred to as a BSE), must have been managed under a comprehensive preventative health program, and must be of virgin status at the time of purchase.

► Bulls must be of acceptable disposition, composition and structural correctness. Specifically, I avoid bulls that have excessively

straight hocks and/or pasterns, have deformities of the hoof, are excessively fat, have short or uneven stride patterns, or have dams with poor udder structure.

► Bulls must conform to desired expected progeny difference (EPD) levels for traits identified as critical to the breeding objectives for the herd.

Of course, to determine the desired direction that selection should take the herd

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requires that commercial producers maintain a system of measuring their herd's performance in the traits of interest. A strong commitment to effective data collection is a cornerstone to benchmarking a herd's performance so that the impact of each successive generation of sires can be measured. While the use of data from the seedstock supplier in sire selection helps to create genetic and phenotypic change, accessing the full power of genetics requires that the commercial producer is

also committed to measurement and analysis.

Finding the right genetics for a commercial herd is hard work, requires the collection and analysis of significant amounts of data, and is most easily achieved when the commercial producer has clearly defined his or her needs and communicated them to the seedstock supplier.

Just as NFL teams put great effort into identifying the best players for their respective systems, so should commercial cattlemen when they make bull purchases. Spur-of-the-moment bull selection usually ends badly. Having a process in place to make the right draft picks goes a long way to assuring success.

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