

IDEA EXCHANGE

BULL SELECTION

The herd bull, whether a walking bull or an artificial insemination (AI) sire, is undeniably the cornerstone of any breeding program. The genetics he contributes can influence your herd for generations, impacting everything from calving ease to carcass quality, maternal traits, and overall profitability. For new breeders, herd bull selection can feel overwhelming, especially when faced with countless options, varying opinions, and the pressure to make the “right” choice. This is a decision that deserves thorough research and a balanced evaluation of both genetic and physical traits.

A great herd bull should not only align with the goals of your operation but also elevate your herd’s overall performance in a way that makes sense for the overall goals and objectives of your breeding program. Understanding what you want to improve on in your cow herd is essential when deciding what to prioritize. Consider factors such as Expected Progeny Differences (EPDs), structural soundness, fertility, and health protocols when selecting your new sire. This is where record keeping, as discussed in the October 2024 issue of Spotlight on Speckle Park, comes into play—tracking your herd’s performance helps you pinpoint areas that need improvement, giving you a clear understanding of what to focus on. Of equal importance is taking the time to evaluate the bull’s dam and lineage—

strong maternal genetics often correlate with better-producing offspring. One could argue that it’s the cow family behind a bull that truly makes all the difference.

Budgeting is another critical aspect of herd bull selection. A well-researched investment in a bull that meets your operation’s specific needs often yields the best results, regardless of the price tag. One must also decide where to purchase—from a sale or by private treaty—and ensure that you are working with a reputable source that offers post-sale support.

In this edition of Idea Exchange, we’ve gathered insights from experienced cattle breeders and industry leaders who share their perspectives on what’s most important when selecting a herd bull. From evaluating structural soundness and genetic traits to understanding market trends and ensuring proper health protocols, their advice is designed to help you make informed decisions.

Whether you’re building a foundation for your herd or looking to improve existing genetics, we hope this column provides the knowledge and confidence you need to select your next herd bull. After all, the right bull isn’t just an expense—it’s an investment in your operation’s future.

JOHNER STOCK FARM

Written by Justin Johner

When selecting a herd bull, it’s essential to stay true to the type of cattle you want to produce. Chasing trends or fads will only hinder your ability to build a consistent and uniform cow herd. If you study the top breeders worldwide, you’ll notice they all have one thing in common—they remain steadfast in their vision. Producing a specific type of cattle will naturally attract like-minded cattlemen and women to your operation.

As producers with decades of experience in selling seedstock bulls, we believe consistency is key to meeting customer expectations. Within our own program, any bull we offer for sale should align with the breeding philosophy we stand behind. If we wouldn’t use a bull in our own herd, he wouldn’t be in our bullpen for sale. That said, there should always be a bull in your pen that fits, regardless of current industry trends or fads that buyers may feel they need to follow.

We breed four different breeds of cattle, yet many of our customers purchase across all four because, regardless of breed or color, our cattle are bred with the same foundational principles in mind. Consistency in type and function is what truly matters.

www.johnerstockfarm.net **See Johner Stock Farm’s ad on page 70 of this issue**



RAVENWORTH CATTLE

Written by the team at Ravenworth Cattle
Garry, Donna, Grayson, Ryker and Huxley Berting

One of the most important parts of any cow calf operation is sire selection. This should be a top priority and there are many things to consider. With the goal of always improving your next calf crop, having a vision of the type and kind of cattle you want to produce is essential and you must keep this in your sights at all times. Evaluating cattle is a continuous learning process. The more you learn, the better your choices will become.

First, assess your cow herd to identify traits that are lacking or areas for improvement with a new sire, such as feet, length, frame score, spring of rib or udder quality, among others. Evaluating your cow herd should be an ongoing process. Keeping notes on the sires used for specific cows that resulted in successful mating is a useful exercise. If possible, selective breeding for each female is optimal, as they are all slightly different. Next, sort females into breeding groups by traits, pairing them with a sire selected for each group. Having determined what traits you want to improve in your females, you can begin developing a vision of the bull.

With these desired traits outlined and the necessary phenotype and genotype of a bull identified, combine this information to form a comprehensive overview of your next sire. Imprint this in your mind so that when looking at potential sires you have a clear vision of the desired bull. Part of evaluating bulls will include analyzing data such as birth weight, performance and calving ease. These are tools used to assess a sire, but we also suggest researching this same information for the bull's sire, dam and siblings as well, if possible.

Some of the phenotype traits we find attractive in our herd are masculinity, scrotal size, skull shape, length of spine, spring of rib, overall muscle shape, maternal qualities, udders and most importantly, structural correctness. When we are selecting a bull, the skull shape should be angular from nose to ears - we like to see a nice poll shape and a large muzzle. All of these traits are significant, for example, a large muzzle is preferred for feed intake reasons. The shape of the head is also strongly related to calving ease. When discussing length of spine, it is important because longer cattle weigh more and in the end, producers get paid by the pound. We attribute a lot of importance to muscle shape, depth of body and spring of rib because these three combined will also add the right kind of pounds to the calves.

When discussing structural correctness, we are speaking of the actual skeleton of the animal, how the bones fit together and the angles in which they are constructed. This comes into play when looking at leg angles, hips, topline and underline, and how the neck projects from the shoulder. Structure is incredibly noticeable when the cattle are in motion. This part of evaluating cattle is extremely important as it tends to coincide with the longevity of the animals. This is especially true when it comes to the evaluation of hips, feet and legs, as this determines how the hoof hits the ground. A correctly structured animal will place their hoof on the ground squarely, therefore wearing their hooves properly and having significantly less hoof and foot problems. References for structural correctness are available online in diagrams to study. Our family has spent a lifetime studying structure in cattle and will continue to do so.

www.ravenworth.com

"See Ravenworth's ad in the inside front cover of this issue."

Upon determining what traits and genetics are optimal to breed into your cowherd, the challenge becomes searching out and locating a bull that will tick as many of these boxes as possible, with your most important traits being essential. As there is no such thing as a perfect sire, you will have to judge each of them yourself and determine which one will do the most good in your program.

One of the other important factors in selecting a bull is looking at his pedigree and assessing as many of his ancestry as are available. For example, having found a potential sire for your breeding program, next evaluate his dam and sire. If you're looking to improve udders, for example, view the udder of the dam and the udder of the paternal grand dam. Research the siblings and half-sibs from the dam and sire from previous years to see if the type and kind has been strong in that genetic line.

As your cow herd develops over the years and is getting closer to the target of what you want to produce, you can become more and more specific with the selection traits. Adding to the existing list of criteria such things as hair coat thickness, tail attachment and many more traits.

As you spend some time researching sires and females, certain traits and styles that are appealing will start to develop for you. Breeding cattle, we always say, is like playing chess - it takes a lot of research, studying, concentration and commitment.

We are constantly evaluating bull calves and watching heifers and females we appreciate. Searching for a sire is a never-ending task, as you will always be requiring another one every year or two. Our motto is - "We are always looking for a bull". If we find one that would be the right fit for us, we put him to work. Getting out and about touring herds, going to cattle shows and attending sales in person is a great way to get to know other herds and what they are producing. When selecting a sire, touring the bullpens of breeders and their herds is an excellent place to start. They will have a wealth of information about their herd, specifics about the dams and grand dams and be able to give you a lot of information.

Having accomplished all of this, keep in mind, bull selection is a moving target each year as new replacement heifers and perhaps newly purchased females will need to be evaluated.

Our goal is to build an extraordinary cowherd. All of our breeding decisions are based on this goal, selecting high priority traits in females we appreciate and then selecting our bulls accordingly. Secondly, we demand consistency in a sire, being able to pass on his desirable traits to all or most of his progeny is invaluable in a breeding program. Thirdly, docility is a must in our selection of bulls. Not only is it preferable to work with quiet cattle, but they also generally do better on feed. Why build an extraordinary cow herd? Great cows have great bull calves packed with maternal punch.

The payoff for the effort put into sire selection shows up in the following years calf crop, but truly, if the sire is great, you will see the effects for many years to come in the replacement heifers and females retained in the herd.

WILBAR CATTLE CO. Written by the Willms Family

We think that the key to matching a bull to your herd is to be really honest about your cows and where they need to improve to get where you want to be. That requires a couple things: not being sentimental and having a vision for the future. When we say not being sentimental, we mean being willing to accurately evaluate your cows without bias for how much they cost, where they came from, if she's the first one you raised, etc. Things get tricky and can set you back when you make excuses for your cows. Secondly, having a vision for the future is going to set the direction you want to go and will significantly impact the traits you want to focus on.

We believe in balanced trait selection and breeding. We have different priorities for some cows based on their strengths and weaknesses, but we saw consistency in our herd increase dramatically when we started breeding for $\frac{3}{4}$ siblings. This strategy has allowed us to more quickly see the improvements or setbacks a bull causes. By breeding groups of sisters to the same sire, successes and failures are revealed more quickly. Rather than breeding each cow a different way, we select bulls that offer improvements in multiple traits and support the advances we've already made. Some things don't work out though, so don't be afraid to pivot away from a bull (or cow) that isn't working.

When we make bull selections, we like to not only see the dam but also the cow herd in general. We prioritize foot and udder quality, milking ability, performance and longevity. We like to see long standing cow families. Those are the things our customers expect from us and that's how our herd was built.

There are pros and cons to purchasing a bull in a sale or private treaty - it really depends on where you can find the genetics that interest you. Overall, it's more important to deal with a reputable breeder whose program you like. The price of a bull matters less than whether or not he is the right fit for your program. The best bull is the one that drives your program in the direction you want or need to go.

To find reputable breeders requires an investment of time. We like to use cattle shows to meet people. We also attend other industry events and follow programs through magazines and social media. We pick up the phone and visit with people to get to know them and learn about their experiences.

If you're just starting out, find someone to mentor you. Over the years, we have spent a lot of time looking at and talking about cattle with people we look up to. We've found most people are very willing to help and offer advice. There's always something to learn and always someone to learn from. There are good cattle and good people in all breeds.

www.wilbarcattle.com

"Registered Angus cattle since 1963 and breeders of the reigning CWA & FarmFair Supreme Champion bull, Red Wilbar Hennessy 3K. Their 30th annual bull sale will be held at the farm on March 12th, 2025."

KFC FARMS

Written by KFC Farm Manager Ashley Anderson

When selecting a herd bull a few things generally come to mind. What is the desired outcome of the cross? Are you selecting for calving ease or performance? Will these matings be a terminal cross or something to keep replacements from? What is the budget?

Functional soundness and a passed breeding exam are the first and most important things to consider.

The dam of the bull is so influential. What do her udder and feet look like? How many calves have been registered out of her, where have her previous bulls been sold to and have the heifers been retained in their herd as replacements? Strong cow families are so important, especially when looking at keeping replacements. One cow in your herd is not nearly as significant as a herd bull that you use to breed 40+ cows a year.

Is there anything in your herd that you'd like to improve? This is an important question to ask. If the foot quality in your herd is great, but you would like to clean up udders, that might be something you consider. The dam of the bull you select should have a very strong udder, so that your replacements will also hopefully improve with the cross.

There are a lot of traits you can also use to select a herd bull. Remember that these numbers are sometimes manipulated with things like feed. Compare bulls with their adjusted weights against the other bulls in their contemporary group. This tends to level the playing field when looking at cattle of different ages or that were weaned at different times. Utilize numbers in catalogues like indexes - this will compare bulls to each other in their contemporary group.

Because the EPD's are in their infancy for the Speckle Park breed, I do find there are some holes when comparing EPD numbers to the actual inputted data of the cattle. The only way this will change is with more time and more data recorded. Genomic markers are a tool that add a lot more accuracy to the EPD, but the breed is still not at a point to utilize the information. I have had more success in selecting based on the real data of the bull than going off the EPD's they show.

When looking at the cost of a herd bull I do not believe that more money spent is always going to get you a better product. That being said, the better bulls generally go for more money because other breeders have noticed that the bull excels in certain aspects that are also desirable to them. Buy bulls within your budget that fit your criteria. If you are having trouble finding the right bull at the right price, you may need to adjust either what you're looking for or increase your budget. This decision will vary with each operation.

Choose a breeder that is transparent with their program, a herd that is on a vaccine protocol and works with a nutritionist. Ask questions. Go with a breeder and a program that you trust.

www.kfcfarms.com

"See KFC's ad in the inside back cover of this issue."



WOLF LAKE SPECKLE PARK

Written by the Brundige Family

We were asked to contribute to the Idea Exchange on the topic of 'herd bull selection'. As your herd bull contributes to 50% of the genetics in your herd, the bulls you select are extremely critical to the success of your program. The wrong selection can take several years to be fully realized and can set you back for a long time if the genetics do not end up working the way you had hoped. Much can be said on the physical traits or characteristics to be looking for in a herd bull. To simplify, we have narrowed it down to three points that we hope are helpful from what we have learned from our personal experience starting out in the breed.

1. Do your research. Look at the pedigrees and the performance of related offspring. A bull can look incredible under the show ring lights but never have the progeny that follow them up. To be profitable we need cattle that will last. If you are able to, we highly recommend farm visits to look at the dam of the bull you are interested in and related females and see how they are producing in real world environments. Take a look at the temperament, udder quality, foot and leg structure of those females.

2. Have confidence in the breeders that you buy from. When looking for a new herd bull we have typically looked to the breeders that have programs we have admired. There are breeders that consistently produce the type of cattle we like. They have done years of work to get to where they are and sourcing bulls from people that have had so much experience in the breed is the best short cut you can take for success. When starting in the breed, sometimes partnering with someone on a top end bull can be a great way to leverage their reputation onto the herd you are looking to build. When doing so, it is as important to do your research on the breeder as it is on the cattle. Before embarking on this path, make sure this is something that will work for you to help achieve your goals. We have partnered with some great people on

several bulls over the years that have had mutual benefit for both programs. When we started in the breed, we knew we needed to find a bull that could make a statement for what we wanted to build the foundation of our herd on. We looked around for a long time and finally settled on partnering with Johner Stock Farm on a yearling bull by the name of Trade Secret. It has been humbling for us to see Trade Secret become one of the top AI sires in the world for the breed, knowing his first ever progeny was here in the Wolf Lake herd.

3 Sometimes it's worth taking a chance. It is easy to get caught up in chasing after the big-name bulls that have everyone talking. Even if a bull isn't catching everyone else's eye in the show ring, he may have the genetic components that fulfill exactly what your herd needs. We are always looking for the bulls that will produce progeny better than themselves. Sometimes you can be surprised by what the right cross can do. Although it is hard to be patient, when purchasing new sires, it can also be prudent to introduce them slowly by breeding a handful of cows the first year to see if they are the real deal. AI is also a huge benefit to try out different genetic lines with minimal risk.

To sum it up, being a breeder can sometimes be a frustratingly slow process. Sometimes it may feel like you are taking two steps forward and one step back as you work through and find the genetics for the type of cattle you are looking for. Last word of advice is to be consistent with the type of cattle you want to raise. Be true to what you are breeding towards and don't get caught up in chasing the fads of the day. It doesn't happen overnight but when you look back and see your prefix working in other people's herds, it makes it all worth the while.

www.wolfakespecklepark.com

****See Wolf Lake Speckle Park's ad on page 33 of this issue****