

Hardee Rancher Beef and Forage Newsletter



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October / November 2000

Calendar of Events

OCTOBER	
4	Brangus Bull Sale - Arcadia Livestock Market
6	Florida Cattlemen's Association Replacement Heifer Sale - Hardee Livestock Market
16	Braford Bull Sale - Arcadia Livestock Market
17	Fall Ranch Management Seminar - South Florida Beef Forage Program - W. H. Stuart Center - Highway 17, South - Bartow - 3:00-6:00 P.M.
17-19	Sunbelt Agricultural Expo - Moultrie, GA
28	Hardee County 4-H B-B-Q - Cowbelle's Kitchen - 4:00-6:00 P.M.
30	Charolais Bull Sale - Arcadia Livestock Market

November	
30	Hardee County Cattlemen's Association - All-Breed Bull Sale - Hardee County Livestock Market - 1:00 P.M.
December	
4	Angus, Brangus, Horned Hereford Bull Sale - Arcadia Livestock Market

Minimizing Errors in Herd Bull Selection

Anyone who has bred cattle for any length of time will confess to having made some serious errors in selecting bulls to sire the next calf crop. Even experienced breeders of reputation cattle have wished they could go back and reverse some selection decisions. This article is being written to alert cattle producers to some of the wrong turns which can be taken by any of us.

Bull Selection Is Serious Business

It has often been said that a bull is half the herd. A bull is much more than that because he may sire 25-50 or more calves per year. He contributes half of the genetic material of each calf sired. If his daughters are retained for herd replacements, the bull will influence the production of the herd for ten years or more. The U.S. Meat Animal Research Center estimates that 80-90% of genetic improvement comes from bull selection.

I have personally visited herds and seen bulls from four different breeds and types in the same pasture. We should not be surprised to see so much variation in type and performance of calf crop when so little effort is made in sire selection.

Begin At Home

Selecting a bull begins at home by realistically evaluating your own cow herd. Where are the cows deficient? Are they fine boned and light muscled? Are they poor milkers who wean light calves? Are the cows too large framed to fit your environment and feed resources? Closely observe the calves produced out of these cows and be honest with yourself regarding their shortcomings. With an honest appraisal of your own herd, you can move forward by attempting to select bulls which can improve the weaknesses in your cows. Even though it may seem unrelated, ask yourself one further question. Am I overstocked? Many producers could do more to help themselves by reducing their inventory than any other single factor. We are all guilty of this at one time or another and the cattle simply cannot do their best if they are short on nutrition.

First Things First

We hear so much today about selecting bulls for tenderness and loineye area and backfat thickness, etc. In south Florida where many producers are weaning a 65-70% calf crop, we need to be focusing on getting all of our cows pregnant and placing a live calf in the weaning pen. This isn't to say that carcass traits are not important but they should not be the focus of selection pressure for most commercial ranchers. Reproductive efficiency, maternal traits, growth and feed efficiency and carcass quality should be the order of our selection process. Always keep in mind that the more traits we select for, the less progress we will make in any one trait.

Selecting A Seedstock Producer

Serious bull buyers know from whom they are purchasing. They have developed a respectful relationship with the registered producer and the two parties trust each other. I know from years of personal experience that even the best bred and highest performing bulls can develop problems and become a disappointment. The bull business is a retail business and the seedstock producer exists only to serve the commercial cattleman. If the registered breeder will not go out of his way to accommodate a reasonable request for refund or replacement of a bull gone bad, he will not only lose the customer but the word will spread. Reputation means everything when selling bulls. On the other hand, if your bull supplier always stands behind his product and immediately delivers to you a satisfactory replacement, then you become his best advertisement. You will start bragging about him and folks will beat a path to his door.

The commercial cattlemen who consistently produces top feeder cattle has taken the time to travel and visit the purebred breeders and see first-hand the way the cattle are managed. If bulls are being raised in a small pasture close to a selffeeder and don't have to compete and forage for a living, then how well do you think they will hold up during the winter breeding season when they are following the cows among the palmettos? Seek out breeders who raise cattle under conditions similar to your ranch. The closer to home you purchase bulls the less acclimation the bulls will have to go through. If you can't find suitable bulls in Florida, then find breeders who share your philosophy of management and who know their cattle. Nothing is more frustrating than to look at bulls which are not grouped by age or price or to discover that the owner or his manager don't know the cattle or have the records you need. What is worse is to see a bull within a group only to be told that he is not for sale. Begin to look for bulls well in advance of the breeding season. If you begin in the summer you will be able to select from the entire calf crop before they have been picked over. Don't be hesitant about asking for references from a breeder with whom you are not familiar. It is not uncommon for commercial cattlemen to order bulls sight unseen from seedstock producers they know and trust.

Study the Expected Progeny Differences

EPD's are five to seven times more effective than performance records as a selection tool. But EPD's are always accompanied by accuracies which reflect how much variation you might expect. Most young bulls have very low accuracies. You should give preference to a sire with accuracies of 80% or higher.

Demand Complete Performance Information

Your seedstock producer should provide you with accurate and meaningful performance records to reinforce EPD's. As a minimum these should include birth weight, weaning weight, yearling weight, weight per day of age, average daily gain and scrotal circumference. This data will be most accurate when the cattle have been tested in large contemporary groups.

Insist On A Breeding Soundness Exam

Never purchase any bull without a complete BSE to include a semen evaluation within 30 days of sale. Even with this thorough evaluation of the bull's reproductive system he may still be a non-breeder because of low libido. The vast majority of the approximately 10,000 new bulls used in Florida each year have never been subjected to a libido test to measure their sex drive. This is a simple test which should be performed by the registered breeder. Who needs a bull that doesn't care to breed cows? Watch him very closely both in the day and at night after first turning him in with the cows to insure that he is covering the cows satisfactorily. If he won't breed your cows you will have wasted valuable time in securing a replacement.

By carefully following the above guidelines you will minimize your disappointments.

Weaning Stress

Fence-line contact between calves and dams for the first five days after weaning reduces behavioral signs of distress associated with separation. It also reduces the loss of body weight gains typically associated with calves at this time. Researchers at the University of California-Davis randomly assigned 100 calves to one of five treatments to determine how different weaning techniques affect calves' behavior and growth. These treatments included:

- fence-line separation from dams on pasture,
- total separation from dams on pasture,
- total separation from dams - feedlot for one week - preconditioned to hay,
- total separation from dams - feedlot for one week - not preconditioned to hay
- non-weaned controls - on pasture.

Totally separated calves on pasture were more active (walking) and spent less time grazing than the other calves on pasture. They also vocalized at more than twice the rate of fence-line calves.

The fence-line calves were more active than the control calves but did not differ in time spent grazing. Although the fence-line calves spent the majority of their time within 9.9-ft. of the fence separating them from their dams, they eventually were found at greater distances.

The cumulative post-weaning weight gains for calves with fence-line contact were similar to the control calves for the first three weeks after weaning. After this time, the calves in the fence-line treatment group exhibited greater cumulative weight gains than calves kept totally separated.

For more information contact Edward Price, University of California-Davis, at 530/752-6789 or e-mail eoprice@ucdavis.edu.

Source: **Beef, Cutting Edge Research, September 2000**

***Hardee County Cattlemen's Association members don't forget to come by the Extension Office and pick up your BMP's for Water Quality notebooks.**

Sincerely,
Lockie A. Gary
County Extension Director

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For questions or comments regarding this publication contact



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