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Thoughts On How You Should Shop For Your Next Herd Bull

The purchase of bulls to use in your cattle operation is by far the most important genetic decision you control. It is far more important than any selection or culling decision you can possibly make within your specific cow herd. If that bull sires 30 calves each year and he stays in the herd for five years he has produced 150 calves, 50% of which are potential replacement cows for your outfit. Let's assume that for one reason or another you would cull one-half of those heifer calves. Over the five years you still have 35 or more daughters sired by that one bull to replace older cows in the herd.

That is about the same number of cows serviced by a bull each year and you could easily wind up with the original cows totally replaced by daughters; all of which have one-half of their genetics represented from that single bull purchase. Of course it's more complicated than that as other bulls would need to be purchased along the way to breed to the original bull's daughters to prevent extreme inbreeding. But the fact remains that your bull purchase makes the most significant determinant of the production potential (or lack thereof) for your herd. In fact, the last three bulls in a cow's ancestry contribute 87.5% of that cow's genetic composition. As stated by Dr. Larry Boleman, TAMU, "Bull selection is the foundation for building a profitable beef herd."

Lately purchase of bulls has also become the most arduous financial decision made by most cattlemen. Shelling out \$4000 to \$8000 for a bull is painful for most of us so let's be sure we do it with some degree of logic and forethought. Many of your bull buying decisions must be made quite some time prior to Bull Sale Day. Begin with a serious discussion of "What breed

should I use?" Volumes have been written about the supposed attributes of each breed, but we need to keep in mind there are no perfect breeds. All breeds have traits where they excel and traits where other breeds do better. However, in pretty near all situations a crossbred cow from a "well planned and structured" crossbreeding system contributes to a more profitable cow herd than a straight bred cow. And, you can make them any color you take a fancy to.

The question then becomes "Which operation will I chose to provide my bulls?" "Do they share the same values in their selection program?" Remember that you are in essence buying all of the genetic inputs your bull supplier has bred into that herd over a lifetime. A perfect example is the commercial producer who has culled hard on reproductive fitness and has a short breeding season. If he purchases a bull from a herd that breeds year-around or maybe worse, has two calving seasons just so cows that are open in spring can move to fall and vice versa, all that selection pressure for genetics that lead to reproductive superiority have been destroyed with one bull purchase. A final thought on where you purchase bulls is "Do you trust them and do they have a reputation for honesty and integrity?" If you have suspicions, go somewhere else. You have to be confident that all data reported in the catalog are absolutely accurate if the next questions are to be meaningful.

Now, before you even open the sale catalog, do your homework. Do you truly have a grasp on genetic selection, production records and Expected Progeny Differences (EPDs)? They are the most accurate tools available to describe genetic differences among animals, period. EPDs are much more effective genetic predictors than any actual or adjusted weights and ratios. Learn what they mean and how to use them. However, sometimes it helps to also glance at the adjusted weights and measures for some assurance that all data have been reported to the respective breed association. It is possible to construct EPDs from pedigree estimates and they are certainly not as accurate as those EPDs actually calculated when all possible performance

data for that individual are included. It is also extremely helpful if Percentile Rank is available for each EPD reported in the catalog. That saves you from having to know the current breed averages for the EPD profile for the breed being considered. (*Breed average EPDs are only valid within a specified breed and change each time a breed conducts an evaluation (usually twice per year). Average EPDs are generally not the same for young, Non-Parent animals as for animals with progeny.*) But, if you know Bull A ranks in Top 10% for yearling weight (YW) and Bull B ranks in Top 50% for YW, it certainly gives you a quick snapshot of how those two bulls differ.

Finally, “What traits need to change in your herd?” All too commonly we are guilty of using EPDs to select for more but they can also be used to select for less. An example might be that we need more growth and then selecting a bull with a higher EPD (say in the Top 25% Rank) for YW would be appropriate. But, we are having trouble with “breed back percentage” and we suspect our cows milk too heavy for our environment. Depending on how drastically we want to decrease milk production we might then want that bull to additionally have a lower EPD (say at about breed average or only Top 50% Rank) for milk production (MK). Also be very aware that birth weight EPD is the only trait reported in beef cattle where a higher Top % Rank indicates a lower value. It’s relatively easy once you fix in your mind that more in every trait is not always desirable and that you can use EPDs to select for less just as easily as more!

Everything discussed so far should be done days/weeks before attending the sale. At the sale you now take your short list of bulls with the EPD profiles you need to change the genetics of your cow herd and give them a look. Do not be distracted but look only at those bulls previously selected and evaluate structure and freedom of movement along with other physical traits you deem important. There is a very successful Texas commercial cattleman who then asks himself, “Is that bull so ugly that I cannot stand to have him in a pasture I drive by every day? If the answer is no, I think he looks OK, and the EPDs fit my criteria, I bid hard to take him home.”

Remember this order of business:

- SELECT A BREED – If you have a well-planned, structured crossbreeding program in place, stick with it. If not, develop one.
- DETERMINE A BREEDER – Find someone you trust with a reputation for accurate records and complete EPD and percent rank information.
- ANALYZE EPDS – A huge resource that allows you to accurately compare bulls and can literally change the genetics of a cow herd almost overnight.
- EVALUATE PHYSICAL STRUCTURE – Ask yourself, “Will he stay sound on feet and legs?” “Is he too big or too dumpy?” Critically, “Do I like him?”

The Spitzer family invites you to the twenty-third annual **PROFESSIONAL CATTLEMEN’S BRANGUS BULL SALE** scheduled for **Saturday, February 27, 2016 at 1:00 PM EST in Fair Play, SC**. They are also pleased to welcome their longtime cooperators Hunts H+ Brangus as partners in this year’s sale. The **SPITZER RANCH WINTER NEWSLETTER** will go in the mail shortly after Christmas. If you wish your name added to their mailing list call 864/972-9140, send an email note to info@srbulls.com or write SPITZER RANCH, 1511 HWY 59, Fair Play, SC, 29643.

The winter newsletter will contain a Bull Test Performance Report with complete and final data for those bulls being developed for the 2016 bull sale. Additionally they always include educational tips, inspiration and insights into a variety of timely topics of interest to those cattlemen whose goal is increased profitability. The SPITZER RANCH Facebook page has exploded with “Likes” and there are now almost 1900 followers of their posts and QUOTE OF THE WEEK. For the most current information about the Spitzer Ranch Program and their February Bull Sale be sure to visit their WEB SITE at www.srbulls.com.

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