

A Little Preparation Goes a Long Way in Buying the Right Bull

By Evan Whitley, Noble Foundation Livestock Specialist

Presently, I have close to 25 sale catalogs on my desk displaying bull offerings coming up this spring. Every one of these bulls is "good" and will help someone, or else they wouldn't have made it into the sale. The question is, how do you pick the one(s) that will help you? It's simple (or at least simpler than most folks realize) when you implement a plan of action before going to a sale and making a purchase. Here are some general rules to follow, broken into three phases, which might help with your next bull purchase.

Phase 1:

Doing Your Homework

- 1) Develop a set of goals and objectives.** This task gets talked about a lot, but far too often it gets overlooked. Ask yourself the hard questions such as, "Do I really need this bull?", "What am I expecting from this bull?" and "Will this bull purchase complement my operation?" Remember, this animal is going to be one of your "employees." Ask anyone in human resources, and they'll tell you it's a whole lot easier not to hire a potential bad employee than it is to get rid of one.
- 2) Develop a relationship with a reputable source of genetics.** There are lots of quality seedstock producers out there who are willing to work with you if you put forth a little effort. These folks are paying for their ranches, cars and sending their kids to school with money earned from individuals needing their product. Most of them don't mind spending a little time on the phone talking about their breeding and management programs and answering questions you might have. If they do mind, maybe you should look elsewhere.
- 3) Familiarize yourself with the breed of choice.** I'm going to assume that the breed you've chosen complements the goals and objectives outlined in Rule #1. Now, it's time to educate yourself with the necessary information to choose an individual within this breed. Acquire a sire summary and read it. Expected progeny differences (EPDs) and accuracies (Acc.) change, so be up to date. Specifically, use the percentile breakdown table to identify acceptable EPD thresholds for the traits most important to you, and apply these values at the individual level.
- 4) Don't forget about performance information.** Most sale catalogs will contain at least a minimal amount of individual performance data. Use this information in conjunction with EPDs. It's especially helpful when this information is compared to contemporaries and is in the form of a ratio.
- 5) Narrow your list to a manageable level.** It's extremely important to go to a sale with a condensed list of bulls that meet your criteria. I rarely have been to a sale where all of the bulls didn't "look good." Therefore, it's important not to get caught on the day of the sale asking yourself, "Will this bull work?" If he is not on the list, he will not work!

6) Establish a price, but be reasonable. Have you ever heard the phrase "salary is commensurate with education and experience?" Well, it applies here also. You can afford to pay more for an individual you know something about compared to one about which you know nothing. The dilemma is establishing a fair and reasonable value. I can't help you specifically, because this value will depend upon numerous factors. However, I will say to stick with your established price. If you can't get anything bought, there will be other bulls and other sales. **BUT BE REASONABLE.**

Phase 2: Making the Purchase

1) Implement the plan. If you have done your homework, the "sale day" agenda becomes a simple task of visually verifying a proper decision. This verification depends on two key areas: soundness (reproductive and structure) and disposition. Remember, you are going to be the one looking at this bull everyday. Choose wisely.

2) No breeding soundness exam (BSE) equals no sale. Enough said!

3) Stick to your guns. Acquire a sale order, circle the individuals on your list and spend your time looking at them only.

4) Utilize fringe benefits. Take advantage of perks such as free delivery, volume discounts (if appropriate), calf marketing programs, selection assistance (this is where the reputable part comes in), absentee purchase options and any reward programs offered on supplies or services. Another important service to be aware of is whether insurance is offered for the first breeding season. There has been more than one occasion when this "perk" has paid for itself and then some.

Phase 3: Taking Care of Your Employee

1) Get the bull into shape. This entails ensuring he is on the proper plane of nutrition prior to the breeding season. Sometimes it means allowing him to lose a little sale condition or maintaining his condition. The key is to gradually make any nutritional changes.

2) Manage younger bulls during the breeding season. Younger bulls, especially yearlings, need more TLC than older bulls. Don't let younger bulls drag down to a point where they become non-effective. Monitor breeding activity and, if necessary, remove those younger bulls that need a break. More often than not, after a week and a half, they will be ready to go back to work.

Be aware of post-breeding needs. The first couple of months after a young bull's first breeding season is critical. Think about it - he has just gone through his first breeding season, so he should be wearing his working clothes, he is still growing and it is extremely hot outside. Take care of these needs to ensure your purchase stays around for a long time.

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