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Maternal Sire

Selecting a Maternal Sire

by Heather Smith Thomas

There are several important factors that should be considered when selecting a bull to sire replacement females. The bull makes a lasting contribution to the herd (good or bad), since the quickest way to change the genetics of a herd is through sire selection.

You want that contribution to be beneficial to your purposes, moving your heifers in the best direction to meet the goals of your breeding program. Seedstock producers are finding that maternal qualities are as important to most of their bull buyers as weaning and yearling weight, and some of these maternal qualities cannot be measured with expected progeny differences (EPDs).

When selecting breeding stock producers need to evaluate things like conformation, disposition, udder shape and teat size, for instance.

Mark and Della Ehlke raise purebred Herefords near Townsend, Mont., along with a small herd of purebred Angus to raise crossbred replacement heifers for their commercial herd. "Selecting a bull is a two-fold situation for us," Mark says. "Any bull that we bred ourselves is an easy selection process; we simply look at past production on that cow family."

Their operation has a lot of history behind any bull they raise.

Research

"If we buy a bull from someone else's herd, we try to do as much research as possible, using the Internet and checking production records on the cow and grandam, etc. I want to see the animals, also. Over the course of time, we've narrowed down to a couple of cow families that we really like. We have purchased sons and grandsons, etc. from those cow families," he says.

These bloodlines have worked very well for their breeding program. "There may be a generation or two of something else in there, so it's not quite line breeding, but we do like to use proven cow families," Mark adds.

When looking at the dam of a potential sire, in some ways it can be easier to evaluate her critically if she's an older cow rather than a 2 or 3 year old. Then you get a better idea about how her udder, feet and legs hold up.

"It's good to also review all the data you can get your hands on, including EPDs, actual carcass, etc. but keep in mind that all of these are just tools. We don't recommend that someone go



out and select for a single trait. Everything needs to be weighed and balanced," he says. "Keep it middle of the road. Milk is definitely something that I select against. You have to be careful, with some of the family lines, that you don't bring in too much additional milk. You have to match this with your resources."

Milk and udders

Some people have selected for so much milk that the cows cannot keep their body condition — putting too much energy into milk production — and they don't rebreed on time in a real-world environment.

"This brings its own set of problems. Longevity is important. You don't want poor udder attachments or the udder will go downhill rapidly," he says.

Even if a cow raises a good calf, if she can't breed back on time, or her udder goes bad, she won't last very long in your herd. Some cows can milk well and still have a good udder in their old age, while others will sag and the udder becomes a problem.

"Once that happens, there's never any improvement. If you

start out with a bad udder, it's never going to get any better. You need better-than-average udders to start with. Udder attachment, teat length, etc. are very important in our selection process. We udder score all our cattle at calving time every year, and cull the ones that don't measure up," he explains.

Calving time is the best time to assess udders, because with some cows the teats will shrink up again after the calf has suckled for a few weeks and the udder may look pretty good, and you forget how big and ballooned the teats can get, until the next calving season.

"I just don't want to be milking cows or having to assist a calf in getting on a teat. That's not what my goal was, in raising beef cows," Mark says.

Disposition

Disposition is also a very important part of the mix. It may not be as crucial if a steer is a little flighty, but you certainly don't want heifers that are hard to manage, if they will be staying in your herd or going to someone else's herd as replacements. You want cows that are easy to handle.

"We feel there is a hereditary factor in disposition and temperament," Mark explains. It's partly heritable and partly the way they are handled, but some animals are just a lot easier to train for ease of handling than others.

"We notice this, especially in our black cattle. With years of work, they are not much different in their ease of handling than our Hereford cattle, but we are very strict about how they are handled," he says.

A person can easily ruin them if they are handled wrong.

"That's the thing about a black cow. She's not going to let you make very many mistakes, like the Hereford will. The Herefords are more forgiving," Mark says. Careful selection and good handling are all part of the process for developing a herd of nice cattle. Some individuals don't train as easily as others.

"I see there is some research data coming out now in regard to disposition, and the profitability of quiet cattle. People are finally realizing that there's a definite benefit to having quiet cattle. This is very good for those of us who have Hereford cattle. Most of them are more mellow, to start with, than Angus, for instance," he says.

Phenotype

When selecting a sire, Ehlke says that the bull also has to fit the bill in looks.

"Phenotype is important, and these animals have to be correct. We like females with a lot of ribcage and capacity. It's a complicated selection process, to put it all together," he adds.

Most breeders have a picture in the back of their minds, regarding what the ideal female should look like. There may not be an ideal cow, but some cattle come a lot closer than others. Then you have to put this together with performance. You want everything in that cow's favor, for performance and longevity.

"This is what we are trying to do — breed a herd of ideal cows," Mark says. That's the exciting challenge of a breeding program, and it certainly keeps your interest, when you can see things that do work, or can see you are making progress in certain directions.

It's always a work in progress, and producers keep learning more and more about breeding and cattle selection, and the cattle themselves are always teaching us. **HW**