



# How Disciplined Is Your Bull-Buying Process?

Show up at sale time prepared to buy the right bull for your program.

by **Troy Smith**



**“I**t ain't hard to buy a bull,” so the saying goes. “All you got to do is be the last feller with his hand in the air.”

The physical act of bidding probably is the easiest part of buying a bull. Choosing which bull or bulls to bid on is the hard part. According to Caleb Boardman, the bull selection process should begin well before a prospective bull buyer arrives at an auction. An animal science lecturer and livestock judging coach at the University of Wyoming, Boardman talked about that process during the Range Beef Cow Symposium held last November in Mitchell, Neb. He urged an audience of mostly High Plains cow-calf producers to take a disciplined approach.

“I think what too often happens is a producer shows up at a bull sale just in time for the free lunch. And the producer's first look at the catalog or the bulls comes after the auction starts and he (or she) ends up buying whatever bull fits the budget,” Boardman says. “I suggest viewing the offering before sale day, if possible, but the producer ought to do the homework first.”

## Identify your goals

Boardman advised producers to start by considering the breeding and marketing goals for their own individual operations. They should ask themselves the kinds of questions that will determine the kind of bull needed, such as whether he will be used to breed heifers or mature cows. Is the plan to sell calves at weaning or to retain ownership for a later marketing target? Will daughters be retained as replacements? If so, what kind of bull will sire females that are well suited to the producer's own production environment?

The answers will help determine the characteristics or traits on which to focus during the bull selection process. However, Boardman warned against waiting until an hour before sale time to begin the process. Instead, a producer should obtain a catalog early and first sort the bulls on paper. Boardman emphasized the importance of using the data provided to compare bulls on the basis of the expected performance of their calves for the traits most important to the profitability of the producer's own operation.

“You don't want to show up at a sale and have that be the first time you see the information on the bulls,” Boardman says, recommending producers use data in the sale catalog to make initial bull selections. He called expected progeny difference (EPD) values “great tools” for comparing one bull with another with regard to specific traits. To narrow the field of prospects, producers can use the breed association EPD percentile table to find out where bulls rank, within the breed, for traits of interest.

## Understand the numbers

Boardman encouraged producers to gain an understanding of EPDs, including their accuracy values. The degree of confidence placed in each trait EPD for a given animal is expressed by a numerical value representing the amount of information used to calculate the EPD. Accuracy values range from 0 to 1. An accuracy value near zero means very little data was available for evaluation, while an EPD accuracy of 0.99 means a large amount of information was evaluated to calculate the EPD.

Accuracy values for bulls purchased as yearlings are relatively low, since only pedigree information, limited individual performance records and no progeny information are included in EPD calculations. However, animals that have a genomic profile incorporated into their EPDs offer increased accuracy.

Considering the wide array of traits for which EPDs are available, combing through the cataloged collection can be cumbersome. Using a suitable economic selection index can help. A selection index is a single value based on a collection of EPDs for multiple traits important to a certain production goal. Traits having a larger impact on profitability are weighted more heavily in the calculation of an index. Boardman stressed the importance of knowing which combination of traits is included, since each index targets a production and marketing scenario.

“A selection index can be an awesome tool when it fits the producer's own production and marketing goals. An index based on EPDs most important to a producer that retains ownership of all calves and markets finished animals on a grid probably isn't the index most suitable for a producer that keeps heifers

as replacements and markets steer calves at weaning,” warned Boardman.

Many sale catalogs also provide adjusted weights and ratios for animals in the offering. To Boardman, the ratios are more useful than individual weights. A ratio indicates how an individual bull ranked for a specific trait among contemporaries raised under the same conditions.

“I would not buy a bull without the numbers,” Boardman states, calling the data too important to ignore. “But neither would I select a bull by the numbers only. Some people do. Too much of that may have led to some structural concerns we're seeing within the beef cattle industry today.”

## Evaluate structure and stay disciplined

After doing the homework and making a list on paper of candidates that fit his or her criteria a producer must scrutinize those bulls visually. If it is not possible to see the offering ahead of sale day, Boardman recommended arriving early enough to evaluate each candidate's conformation. This means looking for structural soundness as well as overall eye appeal.

Producers should inspect each animal from hooves to head, paying particular attention to foot soundness and leg structure. Look for 45-degree angles when observing the slope of the shoulder, the line from point of the shoulder to the top of the knee, from the pin bone to the stifle joint and from stifle to hock. Observe how each animal travels for correctness and athleticism.

“Naturally, you want a bull to be physically able to do his job. You don't want a bull to last only one breeding season,” Boardman says. “And remember that structure is heritable. That's really important if you plan to keep a bull's daughters as replacements.”

Candidates who do not measure up physically should be culled from the producer's shopping list. And Boardman warned against adding any particularly eye-catching bulls to the list. Be disciplined. Bulls not on the initial list were eliminated because they did not meet predetermined performance criteria.

Boardman also advised producers to be disciplined about spending. Have a bull-buying budget and try to stick to it.

“There is an emotional aspect to an auction. It's easy to get caught up in the excitement and deviate from your plan, bidding way more than you intended. And sometimes people get discouraged because the bulls on their lists bring a little more than they planned to spend, so they settle for something less. Either way it can result in buyer's remorse,” he says.

“It's best to do your homework, really look at the bulls and create a final list of bulls that will work for your operation. Stick to the list, but know how much you can afford to pay.” **HW**