



The Breeding Bull: Your Herd's Ultimate Athlete

Condition your bulls for an all-star performance this breeding season.

by Chad Zehnder



LeBron James. Tom Brady. Usain Bolt. These names bring with them a certain performance standard. Each season, fans expect these athletes to be in top form, to perform and to achieve results no one else is capable of. You expect the same of your breeding bulls each season, but are you treating them like the athletes that they are?

“We need to prepare bulls to be athletes for the duration of breeding season,” says Chad Zehnder, Ph.D. and cattle nutritionist with Purina Animal Nutrition. “Bulls need to remain sound and active. One way we can help prepare them as athletes is by conditioning them.”

If bulls are too thin at the start of breeding season they might not hold condition and perform. At the same time, too much condition could be detrimental. Excess weight can affect structure, soundness and the bull's ability to remain in active form.

Gradually build condition

The ultimate goal should be to achieve ideal bull condition and start far enough in advance so it's not a sprint to attain it. A body condition score (BCS) of 6 going into breeding is ideal and should be achieved gradually.

“A single point change in BCS equals 80 to 100 pounds of weight. So, for a bull to go from a BCS 5 to a BCS 6, it would require gaining 100 pounds,” Zehnder says. “To achieve that score increase takes time and monitoring.”

Start monitoring bulls four to five months before breeding season. Early monitoring allows for gradual changes to be made over time, versus trying to make drastic weight changes quickly.

“Allowing a bull to gain 1 pound per day over 100 days, as opposed to pushing him to gain 3 pounds per day over 30 days, will be much more conducive to the longevity and performance of the bull,” Zehnder says.

An early start to bull preparation also helps ensure bulls have high-quality semen going into breeding. Sperm production takes 60 days and is impacted by the nutrition a bull receives pre-breeding season.

Balancing BCS with nutrition

“Yearling bulls and bulls up to 2 or 3 years of age are still growing and need a diet that meets those requirements,” Zehnder says. “Young bull requirements differ from what more mature bulls need to gain or maintain condition and the two groups should be developed and fed in separate facilities if possible.”

If you have multiple bulls in a group, ensure they have ample bunk space or free-choice supplementation to help reduce displays of dominance at the feed bunk. Supplements with intake control properties encourage snack eating, causing bulls to eat smaller meals more consistently throughout the day versus aggressively trying to consume all their feed in one meal.

Supplements can also help keep bulls in prime condition by maintaining or improving BCS and can help balance any nutritional deficiencies of forages.

“Developing bulls on the range or in a pasture situation where they can exercise can be advantageous,” he says. “Exercise and reducing

the energy fed in the diet can also help over-conditioned bulls get closer to BCS 6.”

Quality mineral nutrition is also essential because minerals support the development of a growing bull's structure and feet. Minerals can support health and sperm quality as well. Consider using a highly available trace mineral source so that bulls get the most benefit from the minerals consumed.

Monitor during and after breeding season

Once bulls are turned out with cows for the breeding season, continue monitoring their body condition. If bulls fall below a BCS 4, replace those bulls to ensure your cows are getting bred.

At the end of breeding season, bulls will need some extra attention again.

“Bulls often end the breeding season in a BCS 4 or 5. At that point, younger bulls that are still growing will need more than a maintenance diet to regain condition and allow for growth,” Zehnder says.

Purchasing bulls is a significant initial investment, but trying to cut corners during bull development won't do your herd any favors.

“To maximize your investment and use a bull to his full potential, continue developing him with a high-quality nutrition and animal health program,” Zehnder says. “Think of bull development as a marathon rather than a sprint. The goal is to optimize gain and maintain the structural and breeding soundness of a bull for as many years as possible.”

Prepare bulls now for an all-star breeding season later.

Editor's note: This article was provided by Purina Animal Nutrition LLC.

Body condition scores in beef cattle	
Thin	1 Emaciated Tailhead and ribs project prominently. No detectable fat over backbone and hips.
	2 Poor Little visible muscle tissue. Tailhead and ribs are less prominent. Backbone still sharp.
	3 Thin Ribs are less sharp but definable. Some fat on spine (about 0.05 inches of fat cover).
Borderline	4 Borderline Individual ribs less noticeable. Overall fat cover is lacking. Increased muscling over shoulders and hindquarters. Backbone can be identified but feels rounded, not sharp (about 0.10 inches of fat cover).
	5 Moderate Good overall appearance. Palpable fat cover on the ribs, only 12th and 13th ribs visible. Tailhead full or flat but not rounded (about 0.20 inches of fat cover).
Optimum	6 High moderate Firm pressure needed to feel backbone. High degree of fat is palpable over ribs and around tailhead (about 0.30 inches of fat cover). Fat deposition in brisket.
	7 Fleshy Carries spongy fat over ribs, back and around tailhead (about 0.40 inches of fat cover). Some udder fat.
Fat	8 Fat Over-conditioned with squared appearance due to excess fat over back, tailhead and hindquarters. Backbone almost impossible to palpate. Fat deposition in brisket, udder and along ribs (about 0.55 inches of fat cover).
	9 Obese No definition, bone structure no longer visible. Hips buried in fat tissue, looks blocky. More fat in udder (about 0.70 inches of fat cover). Mobility may be impaired.

For more information about body condition scoring visit [Hereford.org/member-services/herd-management-tools/bcs/](https://www.hereford.org/member-services/herd-management-tools/bcs/).